JULY, 1951

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ARGOSY

STORIES BY

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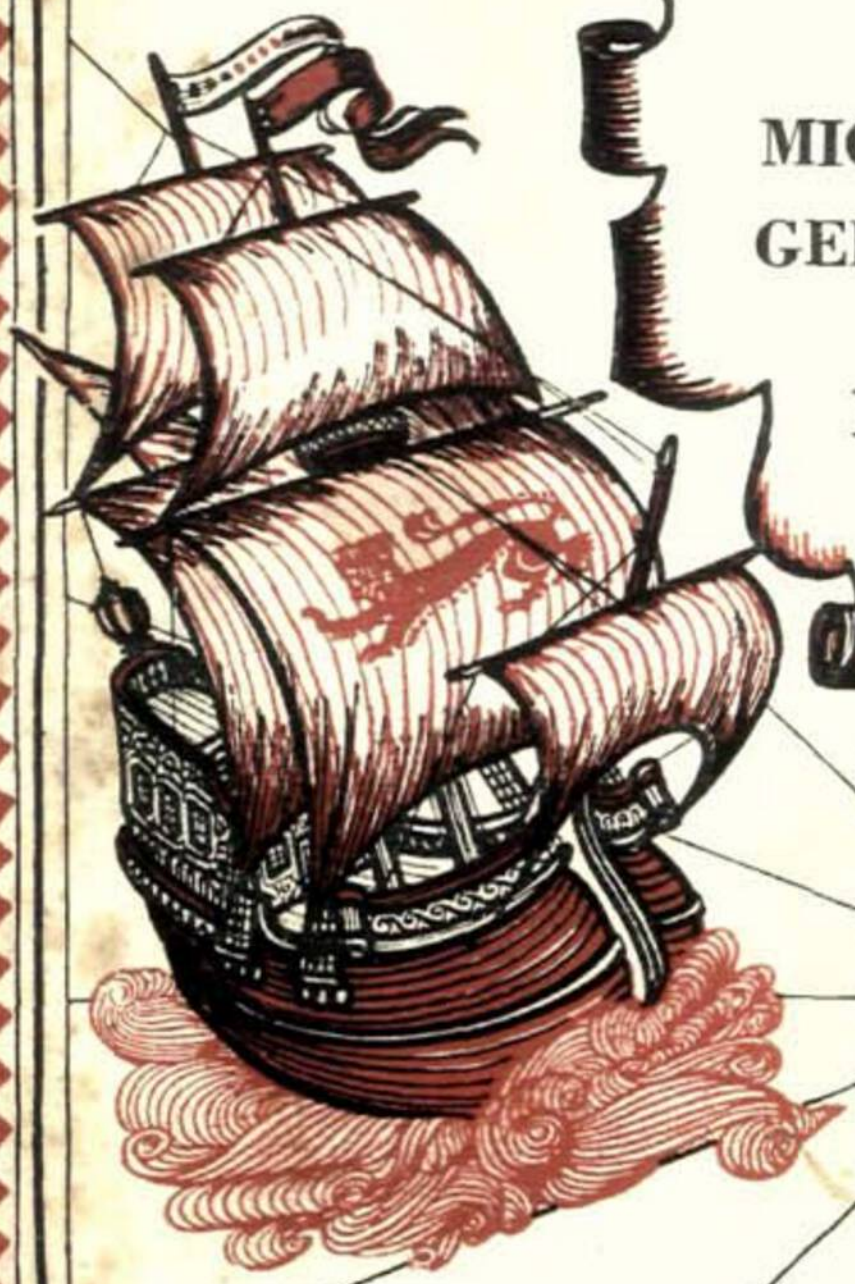

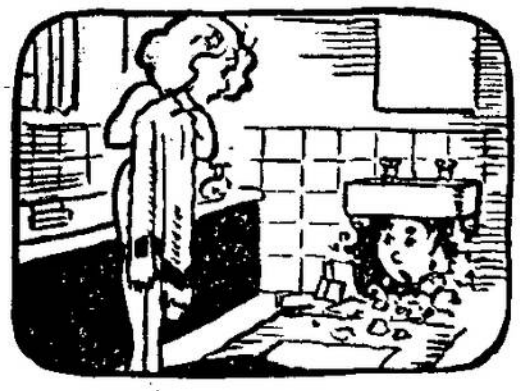

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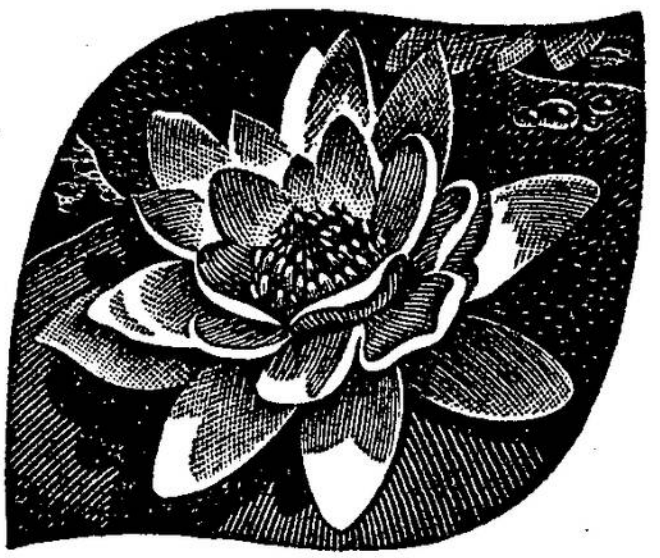

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JANUARY, 1951

. . . " I have secured another taker for my work since I saw you last. This time it is Radio Eireann, and they have appointed me as county correspondent for the news. Cash Sales for first year amounted to over £50."
R.O.C., Eire (Customs & Excise Officer).

. . . " I have recently had more acceptances from local newspapers, and have also sold an article to one of the smaller magazines . . . I have recently written 25 guineas worth of material." G.M.S., Essex (Clerk).

. . . " I revised my article, and I am happy to say that, rewritten lightheartedly, as you suggested, I sold it to ' Reveille', for 7 guineas. I am also contributing short items to ' The Yorkshire Evening News', with 100% success so far." Mrs. J. F. H., Bridlington (Boarding-House Keeper).

. . . " I am pleased to tell you I have had a Short Story published. This success, I know, is due to the help and guidance I have received from you since I began the Course."
E. C., Wokingham.

. . . " It may be of interest to you to know that I had an article accepted by ' The Glasgow Herald ' for publication in their ' Week-End Page'." A. W., Argyll (Ex-Officer).

FEBRUARY, 1951

. . . " My latest article ' Britain's Monks are Busy' sold to ' Weekly Telegraph ' to-day, just four days out from the stable."
A. S., London (G.P.O. Engineer).

. . . " Do you know that I have established cordial relations with no less a person than the Northern Editor of the ' News Chronicle'. He has printed three of my contributions, and yesterday I achieved heavy type and big headlines for an idea for a feature." B. R., Wales (Housewife).

. . . " First of all, another news-story in the ' Cardiff Times'. Next, my first signed article in the ' South Wales Echo'." M. J., Cardiff.

. . . " It certainly was very pleasing to have my Short Story accepted. The Editor required a story with local colour with a touch of the supernatural."
H. J. D., Mansfield (Insurance Clerk).

. . . " You will, I am sure, be pleased to learn that I have made my first sale to a magazine. When the story is published it shall be my pleasure to send you a copy."
Mrs. A. W. (Housewife), Ireland.

MARCH, 1951

. . . " I am pleased to tell you that my story about Teddy the Film Star Dog, has been accepted and paid for by ' Everybody's,' and it is awaiting publication."
Mrs. J. S. (Manchester Housewife).

. . . " You will be interested to hear that after further condensation I submitted ' I Was an Accident Statistic ' to the ' Daily Herald,' and it was accepted for publication." A. W., Argyll, Scotland.

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ARGOSY

Contents for July, 1951

Vol. XII **No. 7**

		Page
Pastorale	**Clarence Winchester**	**4**
High Desert	**Michael Foster**	**5**
Medlar Tree	**Gerald Bullett**	**19**

From "Men at High Table and The House of Strangers," by permission of J. M. Dent & Sons

Yo-Ho-Ho!		**24**
The Whole Town's Sleeping	**Ray Bradbury**	**25**
A Humming of Bees		**38**

The extract from "Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan," by courtesy of Houghton Mifflin; "Wash Your Hands and Pray," from "A School History of England," by courtesy of Mrs. Bambridge; "Bitter Complaint," from "Modern Humour," by permission of J. M. Dent & Sons

Royal Monument Pavilion	**Leslie Bonnet**	**41**
The Fine Italian Hand	**Thomas Flanagan**	**45**
The Open Window	**Saki**	**57**

From "The Short Stories of Saki," by courtesy of John Lane the Bodley Head

Eternal Woman		**60**
Half-Way to Hell	**John Collier**	**63**
The Long Hard Day	**Eugene Burdick**	**69**
The Aspiring Pig	**John Inglis Hall**	**79**
Heavenly Gift		**86**

"Mid-Summer Storm," by permission of the Proprietors of "Punch"; "Long Summer," by permission of the author

Prefect of Discipline	**Joseph W. Carroll**	**89**
The Writing on the Wall	**Stuart Cloete**	**101**
Over the Hills and Far Away		**120**

"Murea" and "By a Sea of Malachite," by courtesy of the authors; "This Side of Paradise," from "The Collected Poems of Rupert Brooke," by permission of Sidgwick and Jackson

A Time to Kill (First Part)	**Geoffrey Household**	**123**
Argosy Crossword		**160**

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Pastorale

BEAUTIFUL with lilies
the garden grows,
and under the chestnut
blooms a red rose.

A little white cottage
like ivory stands
alone in the sunlight
where the tall bands

of trees in a circle
keep the air cool,
and goldfish are gliding
in the dark pool.

She is now my lily,
she is my rose;
she is every flower
my heart now grows.

For her is the cottage,
for her the pool,
the sunlight and goldfish,
the garden cool.

She is my belovéd,
beloved by me,
the rose and the lily,
sunlight and tree.

CLARENCE WINCHESTER

HIGH DESERT

In Nevada we don't ask many questions of a stranger. If this woman wanted silence she could have it

by MICHAEL FOSTER

SHE used to come into town last summer in a dusty travel-worn station wagon, a tall woman turned gold by our high-desert sun. Nobody knew where she lived, and the country is so big that a car is a speck, quickly lost. Driving along a state highway, once in a while you'll see a track, twin lines of pale dust winding away through the sagebrush and climbing to go over a hill. On the weather-cracked door panels of her station wagon you could see where some initials had been scraped off and the place varnished over, leaving a too shiny patch. It looked as if she had used a couple of bottles of clear nail-polish to do that.

She would park in front of Russell's general store and cross the sidewalk with quick swinging steps to go in and buy her supplies. She always bought several big boxes of groceries, and she always paid cash, so nobody knew her name. She had her hair pulled back tight from her face and she wore quiet tweed skirts and usually a grey jacket, trying to make herself look plain and unnoticeable.

She was severe enough as she brushed past you at Russell's door. Unless you raised your eyes to her face. I did once. She could wear that kind of clothes but she couldn't change her face; and she couldn't help it if her smooth hair burned suddenly with afternoon gold when the sun struck it, trying to curl a little in spite of the tight pins; and she couldn't help it if her grey eyes startled you when she glanced coolly at you.

She was always very pleasant, never talking any more than she had to and not staying in town a minute longer than it took her to do her shopping. Nobody paid much attention, beyond seeing how beautiful she was, and I never heard much talk about her, particularly. In Nevada we don't ask many questions of a stranger. There's plenty of room. If this woman wanted silence and to be unknown, there have been more pasts buried in Nevada than there have been people.

Around our part of the state we don't get any of the divorce trade, to speak of. We are cow-country, with some mining. And anyway she had been here months longer than the six weeks for a divorce. So it wasn't that.

The first thing that any of us ever found out about her was because of a couple of tourists. They got out of a big car, a monumental hard-staring woman and a meek rich-looking little man. The car had New Jersey license plates. There were six of us from the ranch leaning against the brick wall of the Elks Club, and they stood looking at us. We weren't much in the way of scenery, we had on wash-faded overalls and clean shirts and if you wore a gun to town you'd look like a newcomer, unprofessional.

" Are you cow-pokes ? " the lady tourist said. She had a big deep-breathing voice and her eyeglasses glittered.

" Yes ma'am, you'd call us that where you come from," Splinter said. He's our talker. " But in Nevada," he said, " the word is buckaroo."

The little man spoke up wistfully. " How about your six-guns ? " he said. " Don't you use them any more ? "

" Sure, for work," Splinter said. " But only for big stuff."

" Aren't there any notches on your six-gun ? " the lady tourist said archly.

" Well, for myself, I use my Service automatic," Splinter said. " In the Marines, we didn't stop to cut notches."

The little man seemed disappointed, as tourists always do when they look us over, and his wife turned away. But just then this unknown woman of ours came walking quickly by on her way to the drug store. The lady tourist stepped majestically forward.

" And do *you* live on a cattle-ranch, my dear ? " she said.

" No," the woman said courteously, and tried to walk on, but the lady tourist stopped her again by asking, " What does a girl like you find to do here ? "

This time, the tone was such that a couple of the boys stirred angrily, leaning against the wall. But our strange woman looked patient and maybe even a little amused.

" It's very interesting here," she said.

The lady tourist, completely disregarding the obviously too-conservative clothes, was staring with hard prominent eyes at her face. " You carry yourself as if you danced a great deal."

" I have," our stranger said.

" What is your name ? "

" I've used several," our stranger said demurely, and this time she stepped around the lady tourist and walked on.

Not troubling to lower her voice, the lady tourist said to her small faded husband, " A real Western type. As I have always told you, Henry, I can learn all about a woman just by talking with her."

Henry was looking considerably perked up, but probably not because he had been viewing her as a Western type.

" If we were going to stop here, Henry, I'd have you take me to one of the dance-halls," the lady tourist said. " I should like to see a cowtown dance-hall. They often marry ranchers and become quite respectable."

I eased out across the sidewalk, taking off my hat.

" Madam, you're making a very grave mistake," I said, not looking at her, looking at Henry.

But Henry wasn't going to do anything about it. He was trying to swallow his Adam's apple.

The rest of the boys stayed leaning against the wall, with downcast eyes. That's Nevada, too. Feeling myself getting red and awkward I faced the lady tourist's hard-glittering eye-glasses. I didn't like it, but after all, a woman in some kind of trouble had chosen to come and live among us in our country. We didn't know her, but if she felt that way about it she was one of ours and no outsider was going to patronize her.

" She's your—friend ? " the lady tourist asked briskly.

" No," I said. " I don't even know her name, but—"

" I am never mistaken," she said with great firmness. " You look like a nice young man, and I think you know nothing about women. And I can tell by the cultured way you speak that you are a newcomer here. You are very thin. Are you staying on a dude ranch for your health ? "

" No," I said.

" We stayed at a very nice one near Reno last week," she said. " I'll give you one of its cards, if you wish."

" Well, no, but thank you," I said.

" As for that woman," she said with brittle care, " I should advise you not to fly to her defence. No woman can look that dramatic without my knowing all about her."

And away she sailed, proudly carrying her powers of observation with her. Henry gave a little jump and pattered along after her.

I went back and leaned in my place against the wall again. After a long time, Splinter rolled a cigarette and licking it studiously, murmured, " He speaks in a cultured way."

" Shut up," I said.

Jake, our old-timer, chewed meditatively, his scraggly white moustache wrinkling up between his chin and his nose.

" Such a lovely dude ranch," he said. " I hear they teach you to ride a hoss in them places, young feller."

" Henry looked real desperate," Pecos said. " His wife was accosted in a public place. I seen the terrible look in Henry's eye. Watch out for them quiet kind."

" A nice young man can get into bad trouble by flying to defences," Billings said, watching a wheeling buzzard high above

the town. " Especially if he ain't been made acquainted with either lady."

" Pore, pitifully thin newcomers that come here for their health should ought to remember what their doctor must of told them," Bobwire Jackson said. " No excitement, no high-society doings, and keep their hat on in the heat of the sun."

It would have gone on quite awhile, that slow ribbing, except that our mysterious woman was coming back from the drug store. She didn't look at us, but as she passed she was concealing a smile. Her lips showed that she had seen us around, and that she too felt in a way that she was already one of us.

There was strictly no buckaroo comment about her after she had gone by. Cigarette smoke curled drowsily, old Jake shifted his weight cautiously to ease his aching feet in his tight go-to-town boots, somebody else whistled vaguely at a sheep-dog trotting down the empty middle of the street. And after a while we saw our Chinaman, renamed Algernon for ranch purposes and because we liked him, coming towards us from the general store, having finished buying the month's supplies for the ranch cook-house.

" You boys come-along now," he said.

We slouched off the wall and followed him. While we were loading the truck with crates of groceries in the alley, Sog Magruder came to the dirty back door of his flashy bar and stood watching us.

" Well, I see the Circle S is going to eat for another month," he said, heavily genial.

" Yup," Splinter said stonily.

The rest of us didn't say anything. We were busy.

Magruder kept on standing there watching us as long as was necessary for his self-importance after a rebuff, and then he turned and went back inside.

" Ptu ! " Algernon said, and that wasn't Cantonese.

Sog Magruder represents one of the things we don't like to see coming into Nevada. Our wide-open freedom and our easy ways, along with the increased tourist business, has dawned on elements ranging from rat-faced chisellers to real city gangsters. Nevada despises slowly and maybe nothing happens for a long time, but Nevada watches. We hadn't quite sized this Magruder up yet.

After we finished loading the truck, we piled in and started the forty-mile trip to the ranch, two of the boys in the cab with Algernon and the rest of us sitting on cases of canned goods in the back. Algernon slammed the truck along the state highway like a madman, so that on the sharp curves climbing into the hills we had to hang on for our lives, among the sliding, bouncing crates. Splinter winked, and Pecos and Billings grinned dreamily

with appreciation, because we knew what that temperamental Chinese fury was about.

Once on a hot afternoon Algernon had gone into the flashy bar for a cold glass of beer. And Magruder, after one contemptuous dull-lidded glance, had studiedly let the tired Chinaman stand unnoticed at one end of the bar, without coming near him or asking what he wanted. Algernon had walked quietly out, and none of us had ever been in the place since. But we couldn't know, then, how terrible and how simple the Chinaman's revenge was going to be.

I am running cattle, about twelve thousand head, from the home ranch. My great-grandfather trailed in a big herd of longhorns all the way from southwestern Texas in the early '70's, but now our ranges are stocked with Herefords. After I left Harvard in the middle of my Junior year to go into the Navy, December, 1941, I never got back there because Dad died while I was out in the South Pacific. He and I had lived in the old ranch-house ever since I could remember. My mother had died when I was three. Coming home from the Navy, it was awfully lonesome around the empty old house. I still wasn't used to it.

It was late one afternoon in October when an apologetic but faintly smiling man showed up at the ranch in a hired car from town. Almost shyly, he handed me an unsealed letter of introduction from a classmate of mine. It said that this was good old Fred Jenkins of Detroit, one of the best, and he had something on his mind which he would explain. Anything I could do to help him would be deeply appreciated, and so on into a page of jovial college reminiscences. He watched my face anxiously as I read.

I liked the guy. In a way, I still do. He was very quiet, but with a good quick flash of white teeth in his sports-tanned face. In expensive, careless grey tweeds, with his light topcoat slung over his arm, he was dressed the way I tried to in college, but my western awkwardness never let me carry it well.

That evening it was good to have someone to talk to again in front of the big stone fireplace in the living room; with all around us on the walls the heads of antelope and deer that Dad and I had shot, and the old worn guns our fathers had used when the country was really wild—all the good things Dad and I had fixed the place up with while we were on our own and I was growing up.

Finally, and with an awkward grin, this Fred Jenkins said abruptly, " I've come out here looking for my girl."

And from his wallet he handed me a picture of her. It was only a snapshot but it was very clear, and unmistakable.

" Well, it looks like somebody I've seen around town," I said.

He nodded. " I've traced her that far," he said. " But I don't know where she's staying."

" I don't either. I haven't the faintest idea, and I don't think anyone else has," I said. " This is big lonesome country."

He sat looking at the Indian rug under his feet.

" She's been in a terrible jam. A really frightful trouble," he said in a low voice. " I'm here to save her if I can. If she'll let me. I'd—I'd hoped that you might help me find her."

" I'm sorry. I don't know," I said.

He raised his head and looked me quietly in the eyes.

" I've loved her very much, for a long time," he said simply.

That was about all, until just as he was leaving. He refused my invitation to stay for the night, and asked to use the phone to get the hired car out from town. But I sent for Algernon to drive him in, in my car, and while we were waiting he said, " I'm staying at the hotel. If—if you should hear anything, or—"

He turned away miserably, and I walked out to the car with him to say goodnight. I swear I would have felt right sorry for the guy, except that the average man doesn't go looking for his girl with a small flat automatic in his topcoat pocket. It bumped against my leg, with that peculiar dull weight, when his coat swung as he put it on in the dark hall. And walking beside him across the yard in starlight, I let my fingers brush against his pocket enough to make sure what it was.

Algernon told me afterwards that all the way into town our guest said almost nothing, and asked no questions.

A few days later I was riding alone over the hills, looking for a strayed bunch of cattle. We were beginning to pull them in towards the home valley, because winters can be terrible here and we feed them in fenced pastures through the blizzard months.

But October is beautiful in the high desert country. Somehow in autumn the distances are still Indian distances, with all the colours deepening. I was off our own range, eighteen or twenty miles from home. Coming over a ridge, I dropped down into the head of a lost and lonely canyon. Suddenly I smelled wood smoke among the scrub pines.

I reined my horse in and sat listening. When I rode on, it was at a silent walk on the brown carpet of pine-needles. Once in a while strange things still happen in a Nevada canyon as isolated as this one. I knew there was a sort of ghost-house in there. A long time ago a titled Englishman had come in and built it, and lived in it for several years. But then he had gone back to England, and nobody here ever heard of him again.

Presumably, somebody or other in England still owned the

place—I suppose you could have looked it up in the tax records—but nobody had lived there for forty years. I rode across the old wagon-track that came in from the distant highway. It was well worn with the marks of tyres. When I came in cautious sight of the house among the pines our unknown woman was standing in the door, looking at me.

" Oh—hello," I said, lamely enough.

" The lady from New Jersey would have thought you were stalking desperadoes," she said.

" Well, I notice that you're pretty watchful yourself," I said.

" I guess I am," she said. " You're the first one who's ever found this house, and I live here alone."

" That isn't safe," I said bluntly. " This is too lonely a place for a woman by herself."

" It's the safest place I've known for a long time."

" My name is Wells McLean," I said.

" Mine's Rosamund Adams," she said. She reached up and I shook hands with her from the saddle. With a smile ever so slightly malicious she said, " I mean that's my original name. You heard me say that I had used several. I saw you looked a little shocked."

I guess that confused me. I hadn't seen that she had noticed me at all. And the way I was brought up, the way we live, I haven't much skill in the usual social banter with girls. I had found it a handicap before now.

" Well, I own a ranch," I said. " I was just trying to pick up the trail of some lost cattle."

" Why—you looked just like the other buckaroos," she said. " I mean the way you were dressed, the way you acted."

" I *am* just like the other buckaroos," I said. " I'm a Nevadan."

" You people really love your State, don't you ? " she said, almost wistfully.

I tried to tell her about the way it is, something you feel when coming back from a trip to the Coast. You drop down from one of the high passes—Echo Pass, more even than the Donner Pass—and leaving the Sierra pines abruptly behind, you swing around a turn in the highway and see the big ghost-grey mountains of Nevada. Standing in their distances, across a valley. You feel a sudden liberation, you suddenly feel space.

" I know," she said. " I drove in from the east, from New York, but I know what you mean. I feel it here, too."

We are away to the north-east from Reno and the wall of the Sierras, across a mighty stretch of country. I told her that she had been lucky to stop in the best part, the real cattle-country.

She smiled faintly. " I knew where I was coming," she said. " A woman in England gave me the keys to this house."

I could see right away that she regretted having said even that much, so I just told her she was very welcome here, and rode on.

Next day I sent Algernon around by the highway in one of the cars with some venison cutlets. I wrote a note for him to give her, saying this was from a deer I had shot last week. I thought it was a good way to establish a neighbourly relationship.

When Algernon got back I happened to be hanging around the garage. He stopped the car and sat looking at me impassively.

"Very nice lady," he said. "Top-class nice." When Algernon speaks with a trace of pidgin, he's being demure. "She gave me excellent opportunities to talk about Wells McLean," he said.

"What's that? Oh yes—the lady," I said absent-mindedly. "Er, what did you tell her?"

"Plenty," he said. "You are fixed up fine. Tomorrow I take over a real Chinese dinner, all packed swell in a basket. You write another letter. This time a longer one."

And without a twinkle in his eye he drove on into the garage.

With the way sort of paved by a few of Algernon's neighbourly errands, I happened to think one night that she might care to see something of her vicinity from the saddle. So the next morning I loaded a couple of horses into a double horse-trailer.

She seemed pleasantly surprised when I drove up and backed them out of the trailer, and as soon as she was ready we climbed out of the canyon and rode along the hills. She rode very well for an easterner, and I couldn't help noticing that her legs were long and beautiful in jodhpurs.

By noon, when we stopped on a sunny hillside to cook a camp lunch where we could look out over miles of range, she had guided me into telling stories of the early days that I had heard around our fireplace or in winter cabins. She listened quietly, looking at the far clear horizons as if making this country her own where autumn stood tall in its Indian paint.

But she didn't say anything at all about herself, not even when we were riding slowly back to her house with her hair blowing loose a little in the late afternoon wind. And we had several more days on the hills, days of sometimes silent companionship, before she ever let me know who she really was.

One evening when I got back home this Fred Jenkins was there, waiting for me. Just driving by, he said. I could see that he was scouting the country in the hired car. He wouldn't stay for supper. I was sorry, because I wanted to talk with him some more, and maybe get a line on him.

"I don't suppose you've found out anything?" he asked.

"Not a thing," I said sympathetically.

He didn't seem to think anything about the two saddled horses

in the trailer. I still don't know for sure whether he did or not.

It was a morning on the hills when November was beginning to touch everything with grey, that I said abruptly to Rosamund, " You've come here to live like this because you're afraid of something. Won't you tell me ? "

She hesitated, riding along with her lovely proud head bowed, and then she half turned in the saddle to face me squarely, and said, " Yes, Wells. I suppose I'd better. I think I'd have to sooner or later. Listen. I'm going to start at the beginning."

We were following the crest of a high ridge, but we weren't looking at any scenery.

" I ran away from school to go on the stage," she said. " I wanted to be a serious actress—you know, that sort of thing, very intellectual—I was so young then, and so awfully ignorant. I nearly starved in New York, eating one meal a day at a drug store counter, until I got a job in the chorus of a musical comedy. After a while I met a man named Gregor Volpone. You've read about him in the papers. So now you know who I am."

I shook my head. Our local newspapers are like no others in the world. There will be a story about cattle-rustlers right next to a highly sophisticated night-club advertisement ; an international scandal has to be mighty big to get much space.

" Then I'll have to explain," she said. " I hate to have to tell you Wells . . . Gregor is one of those men of complex nationality —a European, very smooth-looking and very wise. And please believe me, deadly. He was born somewhere in the Balkans, I believe, and besides being Italian he is part Russian, part English, I don't know what else. It's all very uncertain, he was always so—so lightly vague, even with me. Before the war he was a theatrical agent in London.

" He still has an office there, but now he works mostly on the Continent, booking entertainers to cafés and night-clubs. When I met him he was in New York looking for new talent, American talent, for those—those feverishly international places. He liked me, and got me bookings in a series of night-clubs in the south of France. Wells, I married him in Cannes."

Quickly, leaning a little from the saddle, she reached out one hand and touched my sleeve.

" I'm sorry, Wells. I truly am," she said.

" What about ? People do marry," I managed to say with a harsh throat. " But why are you in hiding now ? "

" We had been married about three months when the horror broke," she said quietly. " He was accused of running spies, some of his entertainers, all through the important places of Western

Europe. I believe he was getting ready to reach out to American cities with the same operations. There was the most fearful secret uproar, and then it got into the papers, but they were never able actually to prove anything on him.

" I left him, as soon as I myself was sure. A friend of mine in London, Lady Viola Reef, gave me the keys to this house so I could disappear. I haven't dared divorce him, because that would tell him my whereabouts. You see, Wells, he is desperately afraid—I think murderously afraid—that as his wife I know too much."

" Do you ? " I said.

" I know this much," she said slowly, " that they seem to be able to reach secretly anywhere in the world. Even into a lost canyon in Nevada, sooner or later. And nearly always it is through the most unlikely-looking people. But if I am found, I won't know it for awhile. And then he will come himself."

" So I could be the unlikely-looking person," I said.

" If you are, Wells," she said, " I guess I'd as soon die anyway."

After a while—her lips were so gentle, I hadn't known a woman's lips could be like that—our horses began fidgeting and we rode on at a slow walk.

" I think he's here now," I said.

She turned white, but looked at me steadily. I told her about this man calling himself Fred Jenkins, describing him carefully.

" That's Gregor—and I was going to have to go into town this week ! " she breathed, in a badly shaken voice.

" What would have happened ? " I asked.

" Now that he's here, I would have been trailed. By somebody or other, whoever it is. So Gregor could find me some night. I haven't any illusions about him. I would never be seen again, but I think I would be dead," she said as simply as he had once spoken.

" All right. You're coming home now," I said. " You can't come to the ranch-house because he might drop in any time, but there's an old disused house up a canyon behind the corrals—we had a married foreman one time. That's where you're going to stay hidden until we can work some way out of this."

And that's the way it was for the next month or so, well into December. After dark I used to walk up the little canyon back of the corrals and pretty soon Algernon would come along bringing supper, and set the table in front of her fireplace. She made it charming, with candle-light and even with laughter ; and we would sit talking until late, until the crumbling embers and the midnight wind in the chimney told me it was time to leave.

The boys didn't know what it was all about, but it would have been a great reproach to tell them to keep their mouths shut. I

think every man on the place would have been insulted, and maybe quit. Through Algernon's Chinese friends in town I kept tabs on the stranger calling himself Fred Jenkins. The Chinese in a small western town know all there is that people can see and shrewdly put together. I heard that he was keeping out of sight on the streets but spending a lot of his time in Magruder's bar, making it his headquarters. So Magruder, we figured, could be the unlikely-looking person who had located her here. My classmate, who had written the letter of introduction, was unlikely too ; but nothing surprised me any more.

The whole bad business blew up on a morning in the third week of December. It was a grey and bitter day. In the big fenced pastures the cattle were beginning to gather uneasily with all their tails to the north. Algernon was in town with a shopping-list from Rosamund, getting her some heavy winter clothes, and Splinter and I were in my dusty cluttered office at the back of the ranch-house. The phone rang. It was Algernon.

" Listen careful, Wells," he said. " I was in Russell's store buying those ladies' clothes and when I turned around there was that Magruder. He is very stupid. He let me see that he was having a big look. I said, for Chinese lady-friend, but I'm awful afraid he'd heard me putting those clothes on your account. And everybody knows there hasn't been a woman on the ranch for years. Magruder went out the back door looking plenty pop-eyed."

" Okay. That does it," I said. " I'll be right in."

Splinter was watching my face.

" What's the matter, Wells ? " he asked.

" Nothing," I said.

When I got to town it had already begun to snow. It lashed your face as you got out of your car, the beginning of our first big blizzard of last year. I parked right in front of Magruder's, and through the front window I saw the two of them with their heads together over the bar. But there were some other people in there, including a couple of women, so I had to get back in the car and wait about twenty minutes until they left.

Then I went in and said, " Well, Volpone ? "

I will say that his eyes didn't flicker. " Hello," he said.

I only hit him once. He got up from the floor with a little blood beginning to trickle out of one corner of his handsome, proud mouth. But he kept his hands strictly away from his pockets. And Magruder carefully kept his hands on the bar.

I've seen death looking at me two or three times, but never so clearly as in the fine, dark eyes of Rosamund's husband.

As soon as I saw he wasn't going to do anything about it, just

yet, I said, " That was because you are Fred Jenkins of Detroit," and I turned and walked out of the place.

Splinter and Pecos and Billings were sauntering about near Magruder's door. It must have cost Splinter a lot, following me in.

" Oh, hello, Wells," he said. " Algernon, he's around in the alley, at the back." Absent-mindedly, he added, " Maybe you shouldn't of done what you just did, Wells."

The other boys had their backs turned to the wind, rolling cigarettes. I could tell from the bulges under their mackinaws that they were wearing their guns, as I was.

" I want them to trail me," I said. " Come on, out of sight."

We went around the block and into the alley, and there was Algernon, with his truck blocking Magruder's back door, which was closed and blank. The Chinaman shivered a little as we gathered in a knot on the far side of the truck, and Splinter whispered, " Where you aiming to lead these guys to, Wells ? "

I hesitated, but said, " The old Spanish Dollar mine."

That is in a side canyon, away off a highway, where nobody else would be likely to come until spring, anyway.

" All right. Let's get going," Splinter said. " Pecos, you and Billings stall around town half an hour. We want the highway clear."

I grabbed his arm. " This is my fight," I said.

Splinter stood looking me in the eyes, and finally he said quietly, " All right, Wells. We'll give you plenty of time."

I motioned, and the impassive Algernon handed me the packages of clothes. Walking around the block again, I piled them into my car, so they could see me from the bar.

Then I drove to Tom Stuart's bank and sat in his office gossiping about winter range and market conditions, giving Volpone and Magruder plenty of time to get organized.

And sure enough, two miles out on the highway I saw that a black sedan was coming casually behind me. When I slowed experimentally, it seemed to slow too, so from there on I led them at about fifty. The blizzard was so bad it was hard to see the highway ahead. The black sedan could still follow my tracks, and I took the grades cautiously so they could glimpse me.

When I turned off on a by-way into the wild hills I had to take it slower because the blizzard was getting terrible, even for Nevada. They made the turn-off after me, all right. Sure of themselves, and on this lonely road, they lagged back clear out of sight, on my tracks. I was driving through nightmare veils of whiteness.

It was quieter when I turned off once more, into the shelter of the canyon. I went all the way up to the old Spanish Dollar mine-shaft, and put my car out of sight in the abandoned truck shed. Then

I walked off among the sagging shacks, and waited. This was the place to have it out. The time would be when they were clear of their car and on their feet. They didn't deserve it, but I had to give them the ancient western courtesy of calling to them and stepping out into full view. I have never been so alone in my life. I knew that I was probably going to die.

Well, I waited. They didn't ever come. After maybe twenty minutes I was sickly certain that they had lost my drifting-over tracks and had turned back to town. I was just starting towards my car when I heard a clatter of hooves on loose stones up-canyon, and out of the blowing snow came old Jake. He looked like the ghost of every old-timer Nevada ever had, in the saddle, and he was leading another horse for me.

" Splinter, he phoned up from the drug store," he said. " Come along home now, son. You can't make it by the highway no more."

He didn't ask me what had happened. We headed for the ranch. The Spanish Dollar mine is nineteen miles by road, but only seven over the hills. A good cow-horse can make it, by keeping to the sheltered canyons and climbing to follow along the swept-bare ridges, in a blizzard that blocks the highways.

Rosamund was walking up and down my living room. When I came in through the back door, she whirled.

" What is it, Wells ? " she said. I told her what had happened.

Walking across the living room again, she stopped and stood looking at the walls in firelight.

With her back still to me, she said, " How strange and how like you this room is. I love it, Wells."

" I'm glad it suits you," I said. " Because this is your house from now on."

" Yes," she said.

I leaned wearily against the fireplace, wondering what I could do when the blizzard was over.

But I didn't have to do anything about it, after all. Nevada did it. The magnificent, the terrible distances of western America.

On the sunshiny morning of the fourth day a plane spotted the top of Magruder's black sedan almost drifted over in a cut on the by-way far, far beyond where I had led them. They had gone on and on up into the hills, past the old mine road-end ; and there wasn't any other. When a sheriff's crew got there on snow shoes they found that Magruder had stayed in the stalled car and frozen to death, after the gas was exhausted so he couldn't keep the heater going any more. A man later identified by the FBI as one Gregor Volpone had got out and tried to get somewhere on foot, maybe hoping to see a light. There weren't any.

But that afternoon, after hearing it on the radio, Rosamund

gently turned off the switch and in silence went to stand looking out of a window.

I didn't say anything. It was not for me to speak.

" The high desert," she said. " Nevada. The grey mother."

Late that afternoon I dropped into the cabin. The boys were just sitting around, all slicked and combed for supper. After a long, leisurely while, Billings said :

" I hear Algernon's fixing up something special for supper."

" Algernon's been fixing up quite a few things, lately," Pecos said.

" Yeah," Splinter said. " Remember the other morning when we were in town ? Well, seemed to me, anyway, as if he'd somehow parked the truck so's it blocked Magruder's back door."

Several of the boys murmured solicitously ; while Splinter licked a cigarette into shape.

" While Wells, here, was over at the bank, visiting," Splinter said, " I happened to be in the back room of Russell's store. Pretty soon Magruder tried to come out of his back door, and I seen Algernon let himself be took aside for a talk. Looked like there was some money offered, looked like Algernon took it all right, just sort of smiling the way he does."

" Do tell ! " Bobwire Jackson said piously. " A bribe, you think it was ? What for, could it of been ? "

" I couldn't rightly say," Splinter said. " It was quite a long palaver, Magruder wanting to know something, real bad. Algernon, he acted dumb, talking pidgin. I couldn't hear all of it, but seemed to me he was earning his money by warning Magruder. He says follow the boss, that was okay. But I did hear him say, specific, not to turn off into the canyon—that the boss was going to lead them into an ambush at the old mine-shaft. Algernon, he told Magruder not to be fooled but to keep right on going, away back into them hills, and he'd really find the place he was asking for."

Jake chewed thoughtfully.

Finally he said, " Well, remember the time Algernon wanted a glass of nice cool beer ? That was a hot afternoon, for Algernon. Now Magruder's had a cold afternoon."

I went back to the house, to Rosamund. Lights were shining across the snow, and she was waiting for me in the door.

Algernon wore a brand new twenty-five-dollar hat to our wedding.

* * *

A man wants to be a woman's first love. A woman wants to be a man's last romance.

OSCAR WILDE

MEDLAR TREE

"'T would never do to lay the axe to him," said Rudd. "I've known him since a lad"

by GERALD BULLETT

WHATEVER may be the truth of this story, of one thing I'm sure: it takes nothing of its colour from Prothero, who told me his part in it. Prothero is as solid, straightforward, and unimaginative a man as you could wish to have for a neighbour. I've known him, in a casual way, since the time when, being then about fifty, he retired like a sensible fellow on the money he had made in soap —or it may have been boots and shoes, for I never inquired—and set up, quite pleasantly and modestly, as a country gentleman, owner and occupier of a small house and large garden situated about half a mile outside the village. His front windows command a noble view of the downs, and on the edge of his estate, facing the road, is a three-roomed gardener's cottage where the Rudds live, man and wife.

Walter Rudd is a gnarled and knotted countryman with leathery skin and bushy eyebrows that meet across his blunt nose. He is old, and spare, and slow in his movements, but still vigorous; and his small dark eyes, screwed up in the sunlight, have a green glint.

Those who remember him as a young man say he was never much different, always rather solitary in his habits, always slow-moving and taciturn, and always as stubbornly addicted to work as another man might be to drink or pleasure. I call him knotted on the strength of his hands, with their bony fingers and enlarged knuckles; hands that are still capable, however, of prodigious feats, and fingers which, where plants are concerned, seem to have magic in them. His working day is measured by the sun, not by the clock; for never, while daylight holds, will you find him within four walls, unless it be the walls of a greenhouse or a potting shed.

Born and bred in towns, Mr. Prothero was a stranger to the country, which he knew only by hearsay. He and his gardener offered a perfect study in contrast, the one so uncompromisingly rustic, the other as urban as they're made, the typical townsman masquerading in tweeds.

Poor Prothero had had bad luck almost as soon as he came among us. His wife fell sick, contracted pneumonia, and died, amid the roar and wail of our February winds, which sweep in from

the coast and gather fury in the cauldron of the circling hills. I fancy it was this that set him against the ancient crooked medlar tree which grew just outside his bedroom window and cast a moving shadow over the house. Untouched by pruning knife for a hundred years maybe, and oddly out of place, the medlar had grown all to wood and leaf, and such fruit as it bore dropped year by year to the ground and vanished in rottenness. On still days it stood with motionless outstretched arms, as if biding its time; and when a wind rose it would sway and groan, and its numerous hands, with a sort of melancholy unction, would seem to point at the window.

Prothero, watching from that window, in the room where his wife lay dying, took a dislike to the tree, and some months later he summoned courage enough to hint to Walter Rudd that he would like to be rid of it. It needed courage to make any positive suggestion to Rudd, for like so many of his kind he was an autocrat in his own sphere and wanted nothing from Mr. Prothero but his weekly wage.

"'Twould never do to lay the axe to him," said Rudd. "I've known him since a lad."

The argument did not seem conclusive to Prothero, but as a mere employer, and a newcomer at that, he knew his place and he let the subject drop. He returned to it from time to time, always with the same negative result. Rudd would stand, stare, listen, and offer no comment beyond a grunt or a shake of the head.

Prothero was a patient man, and where Rudd was concerned a somewhat timid one; but there was a limit to his patience and pusillanimity, and at last he resorted to a categorical command. On this occasion he chose to interpret the old man's withering silence as consent; but as weeks went by, with the tree still standing, it gradually dawned on him that he was confronted by an immovable obstinacy. If the tree was to be felled, it was not Rudd who would do it.

Who then? To engage an outsider to do a job of work in Rudd's domain would be by rural standards a species of outrage. Prothero had learnt enough of village ways to know that. On the other hand he did feel, with some justice, that he had a right to do what he liked with his own, and, interloper or not, he had undeniably paid "good money" for the place and was in lawful possession of everything in it, subject only to Rudd's life-tenure of the gardener's cottage.

The upshot of it was that Prothero, in a kind of angry desperation, decided to have a go at it himself. He had about as much idea of how to fell a tree as the Man in the Moon, but by asking questions he picked up a wrinkle or two here and there, and one morning, when Rudd's back was turned (I think in fact he had gone to his

cottage for what we call " brencheese " in our part of the world), he armed himself with a woodman's axe and made a savage assault on the offending tree. It was in his mind, so he told me, that Rudd, if he caught him at it, would be shamed or provoked into lending a hand; for he judged that the old man would never bear to see done badly a job he himself could do well. In this plausible conjecture Prothero went very wide of the mark. The sequel was such as no one could have foreseen.

I myself witnessed that sequel, or part of it. The Rudds' cottage, as I've said, faces the road; and next to it, beyond a five-bar gate, is the path or drive that leads to Prothero's house some fifty yards beyond. There they stood, the three of them, as I sauntered down the road on my way to the village: Prothero, Mrs. Rudd, and—no, not Rudd, but another, a fellow who, as was beginning to be whispered, would have been glad enough to stand in Rudd's shoes. It was in fact Sam Tribe, one of our two postmen. Young Tribe the neighbours called him: they've been calling him so for some forty years, to distinguish him from his aged father, also a Samuel.

Young Tribe stood staring fixedly, with bright eyes, at Kate Rudd. And with good reason. For one thing she was a fine buxom creature, incalculably younger than her husband; for another she had just imparted to her audience the queerest piece of news. And if young Tribe stared, so did Prothero, his unaccustomed fingers still gripping the axe. Kate, it seems, had rushed out of her cottage, and making straight for the spot where Prothero was engaged with the medlar had passionately urged him to desist.

" You've stricken him, master," she cried. " 'Twill be the death of him if you fall the tree! "

At first Prothero was in doubt of her meaning; for " him " in the local idiom might well have referred to the tree itself. But her next words made it clear that she was speaking of her husband. He was sitting there quiet as a mouse, munching his bread and cheese, she told Prothero, when suddenly he gave a kind of shudder and called out in a loud voice: " He's slaughtering the old medlar! Fetch him away, woman! A-h-h! " He ended on a deep note of agony, and staring in astonishment she saw a strange and portentous sight. Across that old, leathery, time-scored face was " a great red mark," she said, " slantwise, a red weal, same as it might be from the lash of a whip." Or the stroke of an axe, thought Prothero. But he was sceptical all the same. Who wouldn't have been? He felt nettled. He suspected a trick.

Listening, questioning, half believing, Prothero had come back with the excited woman thus far. Sam Tribe, whose pursuit of

Kate Rudd was already the talk of the village, had presently joined them; and I in my turn arrived to make a fourth. The story was told and told, again. Then Kate, belatedly remembering her duty, ran back into the cottage, leaving us three men together. We looked at each other, wondering what to make of it. Prothero was smiling rather grimly, with high-raised eyebrows. He seemed more annoyed than impressed. But I spared no second glance for him. I was more interested, at the moment, in young Tribe.

"It makes you think, doesn't it?" I remarked tritely.

"Ah," said young Tribe, "it does that."

It was certainly making *him* think. He stood withdrawn, lost in silence, with a half-smile on his lips and a curious gleam in his eyes. He was intent. He was excited. He was transfigured, as if by a secret idea.

I could only suppose him to be still quivering from the impact of Kate Rudd's bouncing beauty. And so he was, I don't doubt. But there was more to it than that; and all day long, as I sauntered about the countryside on my leisurely occasions, I was haunted at intervals by the memory of that bright, dark deedy look.

I forget, now, the season of the year; but it was one of those days of peculiarly English weather when Nature seems bent on showing you all the tricks in her repertory. The scrap of dialogue I've just recorded took place in strong sunlight, upon a strip of staring white road, edged with green verges, encircled by flowing fields, and dominated by the great hill we call Kitbarrow, which comes close, too close for comfort, to the back doors of some of the cottages. But, presently, clouds gathered in the blue of the sky; dark rods of rain began massing on the horizon; and in a few moments the day's brilliance was put out, as if by a gigantic extinguisher.

The trees shivered. A great wind came blowing in from the south-west. One became aware suddenly of rooks cawing and scrooking in the high elms, and of gulls alighting on the ploughland, and a tang of salt in the air. Then the rain came, drenching and cold; came and passed on, leaving behind it a delicious smell of wet woodland, and spangling the roads with water bright as glass.

All this is beside the point, I daresay; but I tell you these things because they're all mingled in my mind with this story of Sam Tribe and Walter Rudd. Sam's look, as I say, went with me on my wanderings that day, kindling in me, though it was no business of mine, a faint uneasiness. I couldn't get it out of my head that he was meditating some mischief. I say it was no business of mine, but that's hardly true; for if one lives in a village everything that happens is one's business, because every villager, in a sense, is part of one's family.

I got home in the evening pleasantly weary, and very ready for a meal. But even more than food, I wanted to hear the latest news, so that my absurd anxiety, which I could not bring myself to mention, might be set at rest. My housekeeper, however, greeted me with her usual placidity and said nothing to the point; and so, after pretending to read for an hour or two, I went early to bed.

Next morning while I was at breakfast, the postman arrived. It was not Sam Tribe but his colleague; and he was full to bursting with dramatic and mournful self-importance.

"Where's young Tribe?" I said, as I signed for a registered letter. "It's his day for delivering, isn't it?"

"Ah," said John Small. "You may well ask!"

I looked at him keenly. "Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"Young Tribe," said John Small, "he's gone where none can find him, poor soul. And me, I'm short of a mate."

I waited for more, expecting to hear that Kate Rudd had gone with him. What a beautiful piece of gossip for the village!

"Haven't you heard?" said John Small, gratified to be first with the news. "He's dead, that's what poor young Tribe is. Up at Mr. Prothero's place. Mr. Prothero found him, in the mid of night as you might say."

"Dead!" It seemed impossible. "But I was talking to him only yesterday!"

"So was I, sir. So was I, to be sure."

"And what," I asked, though I already guessed the answer, "what in the world was he doing at Prothero's?"

"Falling a tree, if you please, sir," said John Small, in a tone of patient exasperation. "Can you beat that? Whether neighbourly-like, or out of his mind poor fellow, us'll never know, not till Doomy's Day. He falled the tree and the tree struck him down, and Mr. Prothero woke up out of his sleep to see the end of all, under his very window. Not on top of him it didn't fall, seemingly. Young Sam would know how a tree would tumble, as well as the next man. It must have sprung back on the bounce, if you please, the way they will, the creatures!"

For a moment or two we stood together in my porch, John Small and I, staring at the ground, saying nothing, revolving in silence the vast enigma of death.

Presently I said, unthinkingly: "What about Walter Rudd? Is he dead, too?"

The postman gave me a sharp, surprised look. "Walter Rudd? I saw him with these two eyes not twenty minutes ago. He was alive enough then."

"Not ill? Not even out of sorts?" By way of explanation I added: "You'd think it'd be a shock to an old man."

"Never a bit," said John Small. "Just the same old wooden image. Believe me, it takes more than a death or two to trouble Walter Rudd."

"I do believe you, John," I said.

And there the matter rests to this day.

* * *

YO-HO-HO!

"A merry hour, a hempen rope, and hey for Davy Jones!" Pirates, smugglers, highwaymen and buccaneers: count one point for knowing the character, one for the source and one for the author, making twenty-seven in all. The answers on page 78.

1. *His well-mannered habit of shaking hands was not popular with his crew; he eventually died by "prostrating himself from the bulwarks," murmuring "Floreat Etona."*
2. *Galloping horsemen at midnight and brandy for the parson: it's best to turn your face to the wall when strange things happen in these parts.*
3. *Old Pew, Black Dog, Billy Bones, Captain Flint—and a fifth to complete the list!*
4. *As his ship struck and sank beneath the tide, he "tore his hair; he curst himself in his despair"—for this pirate was a practical joker, and at last the tables were turned.*
5. *"They have dealt with me like thieves of mercy," said a Prince of his captors; but they caused complications by returning him home unexpectedly.*
6. *Through his nursemaid's inefficiency he became a pirate—and fully fledged at five and a quarter years old; but there was something very odd about that . . .*
7. *With his evil companions, this Cornish innkeeper brought terror and death to misguided ships . . .*
8. *He rode with a jewelled twinkle, and the landlord's black-eyed daughter loved him, but double tragedy was waiting for them there in the moonlight.*
9. *A ladies' man, this gentleman of the road: betrayed by one woman, loved by another, saved by a third—and hard put to it to choose which of six wives to settle down with!*

THE WHOLE TOWN'S SLEEPING

When horror walks abroad, home's the safe place, the *only* place to be

by RAY BRADBURY

IT was a warm summer evening. The little town was far away from everything, kept to itself by a river and woods and a ravine. In the town the pavements were still scorched. The shops were closing and the streets were turning dark. There were two moons : a clock moon with four faces in four night directions above the solemn black town hall, and the real moon that was slowly rising in vanilla whiteness from the dark east.

In the snack bar, fans whispered in the high ceiling air. In the rococo shade of verandahs, invisible people sat. On the purple bricks of the summer twilight streets, children ran. The heat was breathing from the dry lawns and trees.

On her solitary verandah, Lavinia Nebbs, aged thirty-seven, very straight and slim, sat with a tinkling lemonade in her white fingers, tapping it to her lips, waiting.

" Here I am, Lavinia."

Lavinia turned. There was Francine on the front path, in the smell of zinnias and hibiscus. Francine was all in snow white and didn't look thirty-five.

Miss Lavinia Nebbs rose and locked her front door, leaving her lemonade glass standing empty on the verandah rail. " It's a fine night for the cinema."

" Where're you going, ladies?" cried Grandma Hanlon from the shadows of her garden as they passed.

They called back through the soft ocean of darkness : " To see Harold Lloyd in *Welcome, Danger !* "

" Won't catch *me* out on a night like this," wailed Grandma Hanlon. " Not with the Lonely One strangling women. Lock myself in ! "

Grandma's door slammed and locked.

The two maiden ladies drifted on. Lavinia felt the warm breath of the summer night shimmering off the oven-baked pavement. It was like walking on a hard crust of freshly warmed bread. The heat pulsed under your dress and along your legs with a stealthy sense of invasion.

" Lavinia, you don't believe all that gossip about the Lonely One, do you ? "

" Those women like to see their tongues dance."

" Just the same, Hettie McDollis was killed a month ago. And Roberta Ferry the month before. And now Eliza Ramsell has disappeared . . ."

" Hettie McDollis walked off with a travelling salesman, I bet."

" But the others—strangled—their tongues sticking out of their mouths, they say."

They stood upon the edge of the ravine that cut the town in two. Behind them were the lighted houses and faint radio music ; ahead were deepness, moistness, fireflies and dark.

" Perhaps we shouldn't go to the cinema," said Francine. " The Lonely One might follow and kill us. I don't like that ravine. Look how black it is, smell it, and *listen.*"

The ravine was a dynamo that never stopped running, night or day : there was a great moving hum among the secret mists and washed shales and the odours of a rank greenhouse. Always the black dynamo was humming, with green electric sparkles where fireflies hovered.

" And it won't be *me,*" said Francine, " coming back through this terrible dark ravine tonight, late. It'll be you, Lavinia, you down the steps and over that rickety bridge and perhaps the Lonely One standing behind a tree. I wouldn't walk through here all alone, even in daylight."

" Bosh," said Lavinia Nebbs.

" It'll be you alone on the path, listening to your shoes, not me. And shadows. You *all alone* on the way back home. Lavinia, don't you get lonely living by yourself in that house ? "

" Old maids love to live alone," said Lavinia. She pointed to a hot shadowy path. " Let's take the short cut."

" I'm afraid."

" It's early. The Lonely One won't be out till late." Lavinia, as cool as peppermint ice cream, took the other woman's arm and led her down the dark winding path into the cricket-warmth and frog-sound and mosquito-delicate silence.

" Let's run," gasped Francine.

" No."

If Lavinia hadn't turned her head just then, she wouldn't have seen it. But she did turn her head, and it was there. And then Francine looked over and she saw it too, and they stood there on the path, not believing what they saw.

In the singing deep night, among a clump of bushes—half hidden, but laid out as if she had put herself down there to enjoy the soft stars—lay Eliza Ramsell.

Francine screamed.

The woman lay as if she were floating there, her face moon-freckled, her eyes like white marble, her tongue clamped in her lips.

Lavinia felt the ravine turning like a gigantic black merry-go-round underfoot. Francine was gasping and choking, and a long while later Lavinia heard herself say, " We'd better get the police."

" Hold me, Lavinia, please hold me, I'm cold. Oh, I've never been so cold since winter."

Lavinia held Francine and the policemen were all around in the ravine grass. Flashlights darted about, voices mingled, and the night grew towards eight o'clock.

" It's like December, I need a sweater," said Francine, eyes shut against Lavinia's shoulder.

The policeman said, " You can go now, ladies. You might call at the station tomorrow for a little more questioning."

Lavinia and Francine walked away from the police and the delicate sheet-covered thing upon the ravine grass.

Lavinia felt her heart going loudly within her and she was cold, too, with a February cold. There were bits of sudden snow all over her flesh and the moon washed her brittle fingers whiter, and she remembered doing all the talking while Francine just sobbed.

A police voice called, " D'you want an escort, ladies ? "

" No, we'll be all right," said Lavinia, and they walked on. I can't remember anything now, she thought. I can't remember how she looked lying there, or anything. I don't believe it happened. Already I'm forgetting. I'm making myself forget.

" I've never *seen* a dead person before," said Francine.

Lavinia looked at her wrist watch, which seemed impossibly far away. " It's only eight o'clock. We'll pick up Helen and get on to the cinema."

" The cinema ! "

" It's what we *need.*"

" Lavinia, you don't *mean* it ! "

" We've got to forget this. It's not good to remember."

" But Eliza's back there now and—"

" We need to laugh. We'll go to the show as if nothing had happened."

" But Eliza was once your friend, *my* friend—"

" We can't help her ; we can only help ourselves to forget. I insist. I won't go home and brood over it. I won't *think* of it. I'll fill my mind with everything else *but.*"

They started up the side of the ravine on a stony path in the dark. They heard voices and stopped.

Below, near the creek waters, a voice was murmuring, " I am the Lonely One. I am the Lonely One. I *kill* people."

" And I'm Eliza Ramsell. Look. And I'm dead, see my tongue sticking out of my mouth, see ! "

Francine shrieked. " You there ! Children, you nasty children ! Go home, get out of the ravine, you hear me ? Go home, go home, go home ! "

The children fled from their game. The night swallowed their laughter away up the distant hills into the warm darkness.

Francine sobbed again and walked on.

" I thought you'd never come ! " Helen Greer tapped her foot. " You're only an hour late, that's all."

" We—", started Francine.

Lavinia clutched her arm. " There was a commotion. Someone found Eliza Ramsell dead in the ravine."

Helen gasped. " Who found her ? "

" We don't know."

The three maiden ladies stood in the summer night looking at one another. " I've a good mind to lock myself in my house," said Helen at last.

But finally she went to fetch a sweater, and while she was gone Francine whispered frantically, " Why didn't you *tell* her ? "

" Why upset her ? Time enough tomorrow," replied Lavinia.

The three women moved along the street under the black trees through a town that was slamming and locking doors, pulling down windows and blinds and turning on blazing lights. They saw eyes peering out at them from curtained windows.

How strange it all is, thought Lavinia Nebbs. The tricycles dropped in shadows of lime and chocolate where they fell when the children were scooped indoors. Cricket balls and bats lie on the unfootprinted lawns. A half-drawn white chalk hopscotch line is there on the steamed pavement.

" We're crazy to be out on a night like this," said Helen.

" Lonely One can't kill three ladies," said Lavinia. " There's safety in numbers. Besides, it's too soon. The murders come a month separated."

A shadow fell across their faces. A figure loomed. As if someone had struck an organ a terrible blow, the three women shrieked.

" *Got* you ! " The man jumped from behind a tree. Rearing into the moonlight, he laughed. Leaning on the tree, he laughed again.

" Hey, I'm the Lonely One ! "

" Tom Dillon ! "

" Tom ! "

" Tom," said Lavinia. " If you ever do a childish thing like that again, may you be riddled with bullets by mistake ! "

Francine began to cry.

Tom Dillon stopped smiling. " Here, I'm sorry."

" Haven't you heard about Eliza Ramsell ? " snapped Lavinia. " She's dead, and you scaring women. You should be ashamed. Don't speak to us again."

" Oh—"

He moved to follow them.

" You stay there, Mr. Lonely One, and scare yourself," said Lavinia. " Go and see Eliza Ramsell's face and see if it's funny ! " She pushed the other two on along the street of trees and stars, Francine holding a handkerchief to her face.

" Francine," pleaded Helen, " it was only a joke. Why's she crying so hard ? "

" I suppose we'd better tell you, Helen. *We* found Eliza. And it wasn't pretty. And we're trying to forget. We're going to the cinema to help and let's not talk about it. Enough's enough. Get your ticket money ready, we're almost there."

The snack bar was a small pool of sluggish air from which the great wooden fans wafted heavy tides of coffee smell into the hot street.

" Half a pound of peppermints," said Lavinia to the man behind the counter. His face was set and pale, like all the faces they had seen in the half-empty streets. " For eating in the cinema," she explained, as the man dropped the mints into a bag with a silver shovel.

" You do look pretty tonight," said the man. " You looked cool this morning, Miss Lavinia, when you were in here for coffee. So cool and nice that someone asked after you."

" Oh ? "

" You're getting popular. Man sitting at the counter—" he rustled a few more mints in the bag—" watched you walk out and he said to me, ' Tell me, who's *that* ? ' Man in a dark suit, thin pale face. ' Why, that's Lavinia Nebbs, prettiest lady in the town,' *I* said. ' Beautiful,' *he* said. ' Where does she live ? ' " Here the assistant paused and looked away.

" You *didn't* ? " wailed Francine. " You didn't give him her address, I hope ? You *didn't* ! "

" Sorry, I suppose I didn't think. I said, ' Oh, in Park Street, you know, near the ravine.' Casual remark. But now, tonight, them finding the body, I heard a minute ago, I suddenly thought, what've I *done* ! " He handed over the package, much too full.

" You fool ! " cried Francine, and tears were in her eyes.

" I'm sorry. 'Course, probably it was nothing."

" Nothing, nothing ! " said Francine.

Lavinia stood with the three people looking at her, staring at her. She didn't know what or how to feel. She felt nothing—except perhaps the slightest prickle of excitement in her throat. She held out her money automatically.

" No charge for those peppermints."

The assistant turned down his eyes and shuffled some papers.

" Well, I know what we're going to do right *now !* " Helen stalked out of the snack bar. " We're going straight home. I'm not going to be part of any search party for you, Lavinia. That man asking for you. You're *next* ! You want to be dead in that ravine ? "

" It was just a man," said Lavinia slowly, eyes on the streets.

" So's Tom Dillon a man, but perhaps he's the Lonely One ! "

" We're all overwrought," said Lavinia reasonably. " I won't miss the film now. If I'm the next victim, let me *be* the next victim. A lady has all too little excitement in her life, especially an old maid, a lady thirty-seven like me, so you don't mind if I enjoy it. And I'm being sensible. Stands to reason he won't be out tonight, so soon after a murder. A month from now, yes, when the police've relaxed and when he *feels* like another murder. You've got to *feel* like murdering people, you know. At least that kind of murderer does. And he's just resting now. And anyway, I'm not going home to stew in my juices."

" But Eliza's face, there in the ravine ! "

" After the first look I never looked again. I didn't *drink* it in, if that's what you mean. I can see a thing and tell myself I never saw it, that's how strong *I* am. And the whole argument's silly anyhow, because I'm not beautiful."

" Oh, but you are, Lavinia. You're the loveliest woman in the town, now that Eliza's—" Francine stopped. " If you'd only relaxed, you'd have been married years ago—"

" Stop snivelling, Francine. Here's the box office. You and Helen go on home. I'll sit alone and go home alone."

" Lavinia, you're crazy. We can't leave you here—"

They argued for five minutes. Helen started to walk away but came back when she saw Lavinia thump down her money for a solitary ticket. Helen and Francine followed her silently into the cinema.

The first show was over. In the dim auditorium, as they sat in the odour of ancient brass polish, the manager appeared before the worn red velvet curtains for an announcement :

" The police have asked for an early closing tonight, so that everyone can be home at a decent hour. So we're cutting our short features and putting the main film on again now. The show will be

over at ten. Everyone's advised to go straight home and not linger in the streets."

" That means us, Lavinia. *Us !* " Lavinia felt the hands tugging at her elbows on either side.

Harold Lloyd in Welcome, Danger ! said the screen in the dark.

" Lavinia," Helen whispered.

" What ? "

" As we came in, a man in a dark suit, across the street, crossed over. He just came in. He just sat in the row behind us."

" Oh, Helen."

" He's right behind us *now*."

Lavinia looked at the screen.

Helen turned slowly and glanced back. " I'm calling the manager ! " she cried and leaped up. " Stop the film ! Lights ! "

" Helen, come back ! " said Lavinia, eyes shut.

When they set down their empty coffee cups, each of the ladies had a coffee moustache on her upper lip. They removed them with their tongues, laughing.

" You see how *silly* it was ? " said Lavinia. " All that riot for nothing. How embarrassing ! "

The snack bar clock said ten twenty-five. They had come out of the cinema and the laughter and the enjoyment feeling new. And now they were laughing at Helen, and Helen was laughing at herself.

Lavinia said, " When you ran up that aisle crying ' Lights ! I thought I'd die ! "

" That poor man ! "

" The cinema manager's brother ! "

" I apologized," said Helen.

" You *see* what a panic can do ? "

The great fans still whirled and whirled in the warm night air, stirring and restirring the smells of coffee and the day's cooking.

" We shouldn't have stopped for this coffee. The police said—"

" Oh bother the police," laughted Lavinia. " I'm not afraid of anything. The Lonely One is a million miles away now. He won't be back for weeks, and the police'll get him then, just wait. Wasn't the film *funny* ! "

The streets were clean and empty. Not a car or a lorry or a person was in sight. The bright lights were still lit in a small shop window where three hot wax dummies stood. Their blank blue eyes watched as the ladies walked past them, down the night street.

" Do you suppose if we screamed they'd do anything ? "

" Who ? "

" The dummies, the window-people."

" Oh, Fran*cine*."

" Well . . ."

Baked and white, the long avenue lay ahead. Blowing and tall in a wind that touched only their leafy summits, the trees stood on either side of the three small women.

" First, we'll see you home, Francine."

" No, I'll see *you* home."

" Don't be silly. You live the nearest. If you saw me home, you'd have to come back across the ravine alone yourself. And if so much as a leaf fell on you, you'd drop dead."

Francine said, " I can stay the night at your house. You're the *pretty* one ! "

" No."

So they drifted like three prim clothes-forms over a moonlit sea of grass and concrete and tree. To Lavinia, watching the black trees flit by, listening to the voices of her friends, the night seemed to quicken. They seemed to be running while walking slowly. Everything seemed fast, and the colour of hot snow.

" Let's sing," said Lavinia.

They sang sweetly and quietly, arm in arm, not looking back. They felt the hot pavement cooling underfoot, moving, moving.

" Listen," said Lavinia.

They listened to the summer night, to the crickets and the far-off tone of the town hall clock making it fifteen minutes to eleven.

" Listen."

A garden gate creaked in the dark. And there was Mr. Terle, silent, alone in his garden as they passed, having a last cigar. They could see the pink cigar fire idling to and fro.

Now the lights were going, going, gone. Everything, thought Lavinia, is boxed and wrapped and shaded. She imagined the people in their moonlit beds, and their breathing in the summer night rooms, safe and together. And here we are, she thought, listening to our solitary footsteps on the baked summer evening pavement. And above us the lonely street lights shining down, making a million wild shadows.

" Here's your house, Francine. Good night."

" Lavinia, Helen, stay here tonight. It's getting late now. Mrs. Murdock has an extra room. I'll make hot chocolate. It'll be ever such fun ! " Francine was holding them both close to her.

" No, thanks," said Lavinia.

And Francine began to cry.

" Oh, not *again*, Francine," said Lavinia.

" I don't want you dead," sobbed Francine, the tears running straight down her cheeks. " You're so fine and nice, I want you alive. Please, oh, please."

" Francine, I didn't realize how much this has affected you. But I promise you I'll 'phone when I get home, right away."

" Oh, *will* you ? "

" And tell you I'm safe, yes. And tomorrow we'll have a picnic lunch in Manor Woods, all right ? With exciting sandwiches I'll make myself. How's that ? You'll see ; I'm going to live for ever ! "

" You'll 'phone ? "

" I promised, didn't I ? "

" Good night, good night ! " Francine was gone behind her door, locked tight in an instant.

" Now," said Lavinia to Helen, " I'll see *you* home."

The town hall clock struck the hour. The sounds went across a town that was empty, emptier than it had ever been before. Over empty streets and empty lawns the sound went.

" Nine, ten, *eleven*," counted Lavinia, with Helen on her arm.

" Don't you feel *funny* ? " asked Helen.

" How do you mean ? "

" When you think of us being out here on the pavement, under the trees, and all those people safe behind locked doors lying in their beds. We're practically the only walking people out in the open for miles, I bet." The sound of the deep warm dark ravine came near.

In a minute they stood before Helen's house, looking at each other for a long time. The wind blew the scent of cut grass between them. The moon was high in a sky that was beginning to cloud over.

" I don't suppose it's any use asking you to stay, Lavinia ? "

" I'll be going on."

" Sometimes . . . "

" Sometimes what ? "

" Sometimes I think people *want* to die. You've certainly acted oddly all evening."

" I'm just not afraid," said Lavinia. " And I'm curious, I suppose. And I'm using my head. Logically, the Lonely One can't be around. The police and all."

" *Our* police ? *Our* little police force ? They're home in bed too, the blankets up over their ears."

" Let's just say I'm enjoying myself, precariously but safely. If there were any *real* chance of anything happening to me, I'd stay here with you, you can be sure of that."

" Maybe your subconscious doesn't want you to live any more."

" You and Francine, honestly."

" I feel so guilty. I'll be drinking coffee just as you reach the ravine bottom and walk on the bridge in the dark."

" Drink a cup for me. Good night."

Lavinia Nebbs walked down the street, down the late summer night silence. She saw the houses with their dark windows and far away she heard a dog barking. In five minutes, she thought, I'll be safe home. In five minutes I'll be 'phoning silly little Francine. I'll—

She heard a man's voice singing far away among the trees.

She walked a little faster.

Coming down the street towards her in the dimming moonlight was a man. He was walking casually.

I can run and knock on one of these doors, thought Lavinia. If necessary.

The man was singing, " Shine On, Harvest Moon," and he carried a long club in his hand. " Well, look who's here ! What a time of night for you to be out, Miss Nebbs ! "

" Sergeant Kennedy ! "

And that's who it was, of course—Sergeant Kennedy on his beat.

" I'd better see you home."

" Never mind, I'll be all right."

" But you live across the ravine."

Yes, she thought, but I won't walk through the ravine with *any* man. How do I know *who* the Lonely One is ? " No, thanks," she said.

" I'll wait right here then," he said. " If you need help give a yell. I'll come running."

She went on, leaving him under a light humming to himself, alone.

Here I am, she thought. The ravine.

She stood on the top of the one hundred and thirteen steps down the steep, brambled bank that led across the creaking bridge one hundred yards and up through the black slope to Park Street. And only one lamp to see by. Three minutes from now, she thought, I'll be putting my key in my house door. Nothing can happen in just one hundred and eighty seconds.

She started down the dark green steps into the deep ravine night.

" One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine steps," she whispered.

She felt she was running but she was not running.

" Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen steps," she counted aloud.

" One fifth of the way ! " she announced to herself.

The ravine was deep, deep and black, black. And the world was gone, the world of safe people in bed. The locked doors, the town, the snack bar, the cinema, the lights, everything was gone. Only the ravine existed and lived, black and huge about her.

" Nothing's happened, has it ? No one around, *is* there ?

Twenty-four, twenty-five steps. Remember that old ghost story you told each other when you were children ? "

She listened to her feet on the steps.

" The story about the dark man coming in your house and you upstairs in bed. And now he's at the *first* step coming up to your room. Now he's at the *second* step. Now he's at the third and the fourth and the *fifth* step ! Oh, how you laughed and screamed at that story ! And now the horrid dark man is at the twelfth step, opening your door, and now he's standing by your bed. *Got you !* "

She screamed. It was like nothing she had ever heard, that scream. She had never screamed that loud in her life. She stopped, she froze, she clung to the wooden hand rail. Her heart exploded in her. The sound of its terrified beating filled the universe.

" There, there ! " she screamed to herself. " At the bottom of the steps. A man, under the light ! No, now he's gone ! He was *waiting* there ! "

She listened.

Silence. The bridge was empty.

Nothing, she thought, holding her heart. Nothing. Fool. That story I told myself. How silly. What shall I do ?

Her heartbeats faded.

Shall I call the sergeant, did he hear my scream ? Or was it only loud to *me* ? Was it really just a small scream after all ?

She listened. Nothing. Nothing.

I'll go back to Helen's and stay the night. But even while she thought this she moved down again. No, it's nearer home now. Thirty-eight, thirty-nine steps, careful, don't fall. Oh, I *am* a fool. Forty steps. Forty-one. Almost half way now. She froze again.

" Wait," she told herself. She took a step.

There was an echo.

She took another step. Another echo—just a fraction of a moment later.

" Someone's following me," she whispered to the ravine, to the black crickets and dark green frogs and the black steam. " Someone's on the steps behind me. I daren't turn round."

Another step, another echo.

Every time I take a step, *they* take one.

A step and an echo.

Weakly she asked of the ravine, " Sergeant Kennedy ? Is that *you* ? "

The crickets were suddenly still. The crickets were listening. The night was listening to *her*. For a moment, all the far summer night meadows and close summer night trees were suspending motion. Leaf, shrub, star and meadow grass had ceased their particular tremors and were listening to Lavinia Nebbs's heart. And

perhaps miles away, across lonely country, in an empty wayside station a lonely night traveller reading a dim newspaper under a naked light-bulb might raise his head, listen, and think, What's that! And decide, Nothing after all. But it was Lavinia Nebbs, it was most surely the heart of Lavinia Nebbs.

Faster. Faster. She went down the steps. Run!

She heard music. In a mad way, a silly way, she heard the huge surge of music that pounded at her, and she realized as she ran—as she ran in panic and terror—that some part of her mind was dramatizing, borrowing from the turbulent score of some private film. The music was rushing and plunging her faster, faster, plummeting and scurrying, down and down into the ravine!

"Only a little way," she prayed. "One hundred and ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen steps! The bottom! Now, run! Across the bridge!"

She spoke to her legs, her arms, her body, her terror; she advised all parts of herself in this white and terrible instant. Over the roaring creek waters, on the hollow, swaying, almost-alive bridge planks she ran, followed by the wild footsteps behind, with the music following, too, the music shrieking and babbling!

He's following. Don't turn, don't look—if you see him, you'll not be able to move! You'll be frightened, you'll freeze! Just *run*!

She ran across the bridge.

Oh, God! God, please, please let me get up the hill! Now up, up the path, now between the hills. Oh, God, it's dark, and everything so far away! If I screamed now it wouldn't help; I can't scream anyway! Here's the top of the path, here's the street. Thank God I wore my low-heeled shoes. I can run, I can run! Oh, God, please let me be safe! If I get home safe I'll never go out alone, I was a fool, let me admit it, a fool! I didn't know what terror was, I wouldn't let myself think, but if you let me get home safely from this I'll never go out without Helen or Francine again! Across the street now!

She crossed the street and rushed up the pavement.

Oh, God, the gate! My house!

In the middle of her running, she saw the empty lemonade glass where she had left it hours before, in the good, easy, lazy time, left it on the railing. She wished she was back in that time now, drinking from it, the night still young and not begun.

"Oh, please, please, give me time to get inside and lock the door and I'll be safe!"

She heard her clumsy feet on the verandah, felt her hands scrabbling and ripping at the lock with the key. She heard her heart. She heard her inner voice shrieking.

The key fitted.

" Unlock the door, quick, quick ! "

The door opened.

" Now inside. *Slam* it ! "

She slammed the door.

" Now lock it, bar it, lock it ! " she cried. " Lock it *tight* ! "

The door was locked and bolted. The music stopped.

She listened to her heart-beats, diminishing into silence.

Home. Oh, safe at home. Safe, safe and safe at home ! She slumped against the door. Safe, safe. Listen. Not a sound. Safe, safe, oh, thank God, safe at home. I'll never go out at night again. Safe, oh safe, safe, home, so good, so good, safe. Safe inside, the door locked. *Wait.* Look out of the window.

She looked. She gazed out of the window for a full half-minute.

" Why there's no one there at all ! Nobody ! There was no one following me at all. Nobody running after me." She caught her breath and almost laughed at herself. " It stands to reason. If a man *had* been following me, he'd have *caught* me. I'm not a fast runner. There's no one on the verandah or in the garden. How silly of me. I wasn't running from anything except *me.* That ravine was safer than safe. Just the same, though, it's nice to be home. Home's the really good warm safe place, the *only* place to be."

She put her hand out to the light switch and stopped.

" What ? " she asked. " What. *What ?* "

Behind her, in the black sitting room, someone cleared his throat . . .

* * *

THE NOSE HAD IT

When Anne Morrow Lindbergh was a little girl, J. P. Morgan, the elder, was coming to tea. Fearing the frankness of childhood, Anne's mother gave her a talk beforehand.

" I need not tell you," she said, " that it's rude to comment on anything peculiar about people you meet, so, of course, if you notice that Mr. Morgan's nose is different you won't say anything about it."

On meeting the famous guest Anne fixed her eyes relentlessly on the celebrated nose. Her mother noticed this with trepidation and tried, not too obviously, to speed her departure. At last the child was safely gone.

Her mother breathed a sigh of relief and, pouring a cup of tea, she asked the visitor with a new complacence, "And now, Mr. Morgan, will you have cream or lemon in your nose ? "

A HUMMING OF BEES

God the first garden made, and the first city Cain

ABRAHAM COWLEY, 1618–1667

There are large rocks, heavily mossed; and divers fantastic basins of stone for holding water; and stone lamps green with years; and a shachihoke, such as one sees at the peaked angles of castle roofs—a great stone fish, an idealised porpoise, with its nose in the ground and its tail in the air. There are miniature hills, with old trees upon them; and there are long slopes of green, shadowed by flowering shrubs, like river banks; and there are green knolls like islets. All these verdant elevations rise from spaces of pale yellow sand, smooth as a surface of silk and miming the curves and meanderings of a river course . . . Softly beautiful are the tremulous shadows of leaves on the sunned sand; and the scent of flowers comes thinly sweet with every waft of tepid air; and there is a humming of bees.

LAFCADIO HEARN, 1856–1904,
Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan

An Orchard of Pomegranates

Thy plants are an orchard of pomegranates,
With pleasant fruits; camphire, with spikenard,
Spikenard and saffron; calamus and cinnamon,
With all trees of frankincense;
Myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices:
A fountain of gardens, a well of living waters,
And streams from Lebanon,
Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south;
Blow upon my garden,
That the spices thereof may flow out.
Let my beloved come into his garden,
And eat his pleasant fruits.

The Song of Solomon

The Gardiner

Hee weares a Posy alwaies about him, and reads a Lecture on the nature of the Flowers, telling you which are Carnations, and which

are double Pinkes and the like. He can make diverse curious Mazes and Knots, but hee thinkes the worst knot he ever made was the Knot of Marriage. He wishes there were no Easterne windes, for they nip his blossoms, and blast his credit, and then hee layes the fault on Nature, and complaines of the unseasonablenesse of the Spring. In the heate of Summer he refreshes the thirsty hearbes with the artificiall raine of his water-pot, but himselfe he waters with good drinke, and thereby growes ripe, and mellow.

WYE SALTONSTALL, *The Gardiner,*
from Pictures drawne forth in Characters, 1635

Wash Your Hands and Pray

Our England is a garden, and such gardens are not made
By singing :—' Oh, how beautiful ! ' and sitting in the shade,
While better men than we go out and start their working lives
At grubbing weeds from gravel-paths with broken dinner-knives.

Oh, Adam was a gardener, and God who made him sees
That half a proper gardener's work is done upon his knees,
So when your work is finished, you can wash your hands and pray
For the Glory of the Garden, that it may not pass away !
And the Glory of the Garden it shall never pass away !

RUDYARD KIPLING, 1865–1936, *The Glory of the Garden*

Winter Garden

Besides (which is a gain to a poor man) my pleasure in it is a very cheap one. So are all those of a minute philosopher, except his microscope. But my winter-garden, which is far larger, at all events, than the famous one at Chatsworth, costs me not one penny in keeping up. Poor, did I call myself ? Is it not true wealth to have all I want without paying for it ? Is it not true wealth, royal wealth, to have some twenty gentlemen and noblemen, nay, even royal personages, planting and improving for me ? Is it not more than royal wealth to have sun and frost, Gulf Stream and south-westers, laws of geology, phytology, physiology, and other ologies—in a word, the whole universe and the powers thereof, day and night, paving, planting, roofing, lighting, colouring my winter-garden for me ; without my even having the trouble to rub a magic ring and tell the genii to go to work ?

CHARLES KINGSLEY, 1819–1875, *My Winter Garden*

Only Common Sense

By this time we had come up to the Gardener, who was standing on one leg, as usual, and busily employed in watering a bed of flowers with an empty watering-can.

" It hasn't got no water in it ! " Bruno explained to him, pulling his sleeve to attract his attention.

" It's lighter to hold," said the Gardener. " A lot of water in it makes one's arms ache." And he went on with his work, singing softly to himself, " The nights are very damp ! "

LEWIS CARROLL, 1832–1898, *Sylvie and Bruno*

A Bed of Rhododendrons

Joshua. For five nights now Mr. Frederic has gone to bed in a rhododendron bush : you know, sir, the one on the south side of the west wing, beside that statue they call Calliope, a classical character, sir. Every morning the housemaid has found his bed unrumpled, and the gardener has found the rhododendrons rumpled. Well, it gives them a jolt, Mr. Hugo, as who wouldn't it ? I try to make light of it, so as to keep them in the dark : but one day they'll talk and Madame will know all about it.

CHRISTOPHER FRY'S translation of *Jean Anouilh's " Ring Round the Moon "*

Bitter Complaint

A garden is a loathsome thing—eh, what ?
Blight, snail,
Pea-weevil,
Green-fly such a lot !
My hardest tool
Is powerless, yet the fool
Next door contends that slugs are not—
Not slugs ! in gardens ! when the eve is cool ?
Nay, but I have some lime :
'Tis very sure they shall not walk in mine.

H. W. HODGES

Cure for Failure

I think one should put one's son apprentice to a gardener before he goes into the House of Commons, that when he is an unsuccessful politician he may retire to his garden with some pleasure and skill to boot.

Mrs. Elizabeth Montagu to Hon. Mrs. Boscawen, 25 Oct., 1757

ROYAL MONUMENT PAVILION

The close proximity in which Liu and the lady stood was improper to a degree

by LESLIE BONNET

ONE day, one thousand years ago, not far from Peking, the countryside sweltered in early morning heat. Outside a large village the tessellation of paddy fields fretted the flat landscape to the far horizon. Only clumps of feathery bamboo surrounding distant farms broke the horizontal monotony.

The white road, high above the fields, ran through the village north and south and faded into shimmering distance. Clouds of dust that hardly moved revealed the ant-like progress of burdened coolies.

A larger cloud of dust, already nearly hidden in the haze of heat was being made by the litter and attendants of Wang You-tao who had left his village that morning on his way to the capital to sit for the Imperial Examinations.

Ming Yu-hua, his young wife, sat in a shady chamber with one wall open to the courtyard. No sooner had she respectfully witnessed her husband's departure than an old servant had arrived from her father's household. He bore a message bidding her attend the family's ancestral worship.

Yu-hua was troubled in mind. She would not lightly disregard the summons. But alone with her in the house, except for the servants, was her young sister-in-law. She wondered if it would be proper to leave her.

But her sister-in-law persuaded her so prettily and the old retainer was so insistent that she decided to set off with him at once and to return before nightfall.

At her parents' house she took her proper part in the rites and slipped away to return home as soon as she could.

The sun was setting in dark murk.

She had scarcely cleared the town when the heat, which had been mounting all day, broke in violent thunder.

Alone as she was, she sought the nearest refuge. It was the unoccupied Royal Monument Pavilion. The rain crashed on the great roof tiles, swept in through the open sides. Yu-hua stood patiently where it was driest, in the middle.

Out of the crashing blackness came running a man. He too huddled in the Pavilion.

A flash of lightning enabled Yu-hua to see him. He was young and tall. He wore the skull-cap of a scholar.

The lightning flash also showed the young man that the Temple was already occupied. He saw a young married lady of good station and of great beauty standing forlorn by his side.

Liu, for that was his name, was a young man of poor origin, of good sense; but of indifferent intellect. Ambitious beyond his capacities, he had submitted an essay for the Imperial Examinations. It had been rejected already three times.

It was his good sense which told him instantly that the close proximity in which he and the lady now stood was improper to a degree and compromising beyond explanation. He therefore uttered a little laugh to convey his embarrassment and then plunged headlong out into the storm again.

Yu-hua could not but applaud the nice feeling which had prompted him, though the sudden departure made her conscious of the fact that she was very alone.

The same thought struck Liu as he splashed away through the deluge. His delicate appreciation of the proprieties had resolved a situation which invited censure. But was he justified in leaving a lady so helpless to the mercy of any rascal who might come that way? The answer was plain. He decided to return and to protect the lady by a presence remote enough to preclude evil thoughts.

So he waded back, lit from time to time by flashes of lightning. Yu-hua saw his coming and was relieved, and afraid.

But her opinion of the young man grew very high when she saw that, instead of entering, he stood humbly on guard outside, under the eaves.

In this position he was able to protect without embarrassment. In this position he also received the full discharge of water on his poorly protected head as it cascaded off the eaves.

The storm did not abate, and in this miserable but praiseworthy plight Liu remained. But he had more than the by now half-hysterical gratitude of the lady for his reward.

All seeing, as they must professionally be, the Four Sentin Gods in the heavens duly noted the meritorious deed and duly recorded it. And as a result the Chief Examiner in Peking was influenced by these supernatural agents to take Liu's essay from the bottom of the rejected scrolls and place it at the top of the successful compositions.

This happened while Yu-hua still drooped in the centre of the pavilion, while the storm still raged and while great spouts of water still rattled on Liu's devoted head.

It was very late when the clouds blew over and Yu-hua was able to slip wordlessly away. Liu saw her go with satisfaction and relief. Closing his mind to teasing thoughts he trudged soddenly away.

Cold and weary, on reaching her husband's house, Yu-hua yet frankly told of the night's experience to her sister-in-law before she sank to rest.

She had not reckoned that the innocent maiden would then tell the whole story to Wang, the husband, on his return. But that is exactly what she did.

Wang said nothing to alarm his young sister. But he was deeply affronted. He prudently put the worst construction on what he had heard. Accordingly it did not take him long to decide what was best to be done.

He summoned Yu-hua. When she had made her obeisances he told her that news had arrived that both her parents were ill.

" I shall send servants with you at once," he informed her. " Unworthy creature that I am, my fatigues are too great to permit me the felicity of accompanying you. Pray, present my excuses to your distinguished parent and hand him this letter."

" My lord is too good," Yu-hua was bowing herself out.

" As you deserve," responded Wang graciously, waving her away.

So Yu-hua set off hastily to her parents, who were in the best of health, bearing in all innocence the documents of her divorce to present to her father.

This light strategem of Wang's had avoided the possibility of any unsettling supplications.

The incident was the sooner forgotten because of the early arrival of news that Wang had been successful in the Imperial Examinations. The path to unlimited official advancement was open. Wang's expressionless face showed the depth of his feelings. When he had recovered he sent for servants and his litter. He must go to Peking to confirm his success.

At the Chief Examiner's Office in Peking Wang was not the only successful candidate in attendance. The Chief Examiner was receiving a growing number of them.

But his attention was taken almost exclusively by a handsome youth. It was Liu.

Liu was saying humbly, " No, learned one, this humble donkey cannot."

" I must beg you to try still harder," said the Chief Examiner. " This, your illustrious essay, falls short of sheer excellence in so many particulars that it merits a degree of disapprobation seldom deserved by mortal man. It was placed below the worst com-

positions submitted to this sorely tried one that am I, because there was no lower place that could be thought of. It was placed there not once, nor twice ; but three times."

Liu bowed an abject head.

" Yet," continued the Chief Examiner, " I am moved to replace it in the position of first amongst the successful essays. No power could have forced me to such an action—except a supernatural one. So think more deeply. What meritorious act have you committed which could so invoke the power of the Heavenly Ones ? "

Liu wrinkled his brow. The other scholars looked on in embarrassed amusement.

Then Liu brightened a little and recounted very diffidently the full story of his encounter with Yu-hua.

The Chief Examiner was enchanted.

" May this humble one," he enquired, " offer great felicitations on the distinguished patronage which your illustrious self undoubtedly enjoys? May this trifling one that am I venture to foretell great glory and honour ? May this thing make obeisance before the honourable Liu ? "

Liu received the congratulations that were showered on his head with much the same phlegm as he had previously displayed in the rain.

The chagrined husband did not wait to hear or see any more. He had recognized at once the authenticity of the story. His withdrawal was unobtrusive ; but rapid.

Outside, his litter still waited ; the servants were gambling noisily with others in the shade. He summoned them curtly. The departure from Peking was instant. Wang had a long journey to make, a furious father-in-law to interview, a wronged wife to recover and propitiate. His conduct, he felt, had been irreproachable. But he had little hope that it would go unreproached.

And so the old tale ends as it began, with a far cloud of dust on a sun-scorched plain. Wang was returning chastened. And as for Liu, he promptly married Yu-hua's young and innocent sister-in-law, lived long in high esteem and felicity, and had many sons to honour him.

But, if this tale is indeed as true as it is pretty, it is difficult to imagine just when and where Liu had met her.

* * *

DEFINITION

Intuition : the strange instinct that tells a woman she is right, whether she is or not.

AMBROSE BIERCE

THE FINE ITALIAN HAND

"Only strength is important," said the messenger sadly, "the strength of the lion and the cunning of the wolf"

by THOMAS FLANAGAN

AS he padded down the stone-flagged passage beside the tall, erect figure of Count Montagno, the duke's messenger looked meagre and inadequate, his thin body hunched in a frayed crimson robe of court, the yellowed skin of his face stretched across sharp cheek-bones and slim, shrunken chin.

The corridor, cold with the bone-piercing wind of North Italy, was lit by the wavering torches of the servants who preceded them down the hall.

The duke's messenger looked with grudging admiration at Count Montagno, the Wolf of the North, the greatest of the *condottieri.* The duke's messenger, who had known the sallow, lupine face of the King of France, who had watched the heavy, sullen tread of the Hapsburg, had never felt such fear in the presence of a man. Never but once, and that was the time when he had first met his lord and duke, the terrible Cesare Borgia.

The racing, shadowy flames from the pitch torches showed him now the count's tall, sinewy body, his jutting, wolf-like head. The duke's messenger longed for the quiet of his small room, for the comforting feel of vellum between his fingers. He longed to resume his translation of Livy. In the turmoil of fifteenth century Italy nothing, the duke's messenger knew, was needed so badly as quiet, unexciting scholarship. And yet (the duke's messenger shrugged) here he was running errands between the wolf of the north and the lion of the midlands.

He heard the harsh, soldier-like tones of the man beside him:

"You can easily see, my dear sir, that not only your great master, but I myself and those within my liege, are placed in hazard by this theft. France waits beyond the mountains—waiting for the thinnest of excuses with which to justify to the Holy Father an invasion of all Italy—and now this."

By contrast, the voice of the duke's messenger was cracked and pedantic, flecked with the dust of a hundred libraries.

"You could write to His Majesty of France. You could explain the theft."

The count turned, and by the glaring light looked down upon the thin messenger.

" We have maintained the sovereignty of these states, your master and I, by creating the legend of our strength, of our cunning. And you wish us to tell France that we permitted a foot soldier, or a majordomo, or a servant, to make off with Borgia's gift to the Majesty of France ? "

" It would be so simple. One should never be afraid to confess mistakes. That is a sign of strength, not of weakness."

They had entered the large banqueting hall, where tapers, fixed to the walls, shed a fitful light across the flagging, across the broad oaken tables.

" That is a sign of copybook strength," the count said, and the low vaulted room echoed with his voice. He held up his thick, sinewed arm. " This is the strength which rules Italy."

The messenger smiled apologetically.

" One may learn much from copybooks. Have you read Livy ? A very clever man."

The count raised his heavy, confident shoulders and turned away. " We were feasting in this hall," he said. " I and the Marquis of Villefranche, who was to receive Borgia's gift, and our retinues. I toasted France, with the wine and the words sticking in my throat, and then together, Villefranche and I, we descended the stairs to where the treasure lay under guard."

" Had Villefranche seen the treasure earlier ? "

" Yes. That afternoon, before the feast. We had looked at it together, and marvelled at "—the count's eyes raked the duke's messenger slantwise—" at Borgia's great concern to please France with such gifts."

The messenger shrugged. " Or perhaps wondered at Borgia's great wealth that he should carelessly leave a treasure in cut emeralds under the guard of a border captain."

The count smiled in angry acknowledgment of the thrust.

" You know the rest," he said. " We descended the stairs and found the treasure gone. One of the soldiers guarding it has been killed, and the second wounded."

" Perhaps you should have had more men guarding it."

" Perhaps. Perhaps. You are not a soldier, I take it ? "

The messenger smiled primly, pulling down the corners of his thin lips.

" Dear, no. I am a man of thought."

" Yes. If you had been a soldier you would know my position. I have only a few hundred men at Castello Montagno. The rest are foraging the countryside, hunting for food, lest we should have to sustain a spring attack from France. This is a poor province, and

my noble ally, your great master, is not as generous with his friends as he is with his enemies."

The messenger slipped his frail, blue-veined hands into the sleeves of his robe. " One gains only the known from one's friends. One's enemies possess the unknown, and hence should always be courted. But the guards ? "

The soldier stared in blunt perplexity at the wizened peasant whom Borgia had sent to receive his report.

" Because of this, my dear sir, I used every man as a member of my personal bodyguard, or as a guard at the portcullis, that Villefranche might see them as he rode up, see them and be deceived. I even pressed some of the scullery boys into armour."

" That was truly cleverness," the messenger said. " But had you anticipated a theft, your cleverness might have risen to wisdom."

" I am not a huckster nor a diplomat, nor, pardon my bluntness, a toadying courtier. I know one thing, and I know that well. I know how to fight. When I have sword in hand, when I stand upon the field of action—"

" Your prowess has won you the respect of all Italy," the messenger interrupted. " But it is because of the emeralds that my master has sent me here. He has himself regaled me with tales of your prowess."

" Indeed ? "

" Indeed and indeed." As the messenger looked upon the heavy wolf's-head face, it came to him again how ill-suited he was anywhere but among his books. He shuddered delicately, and drew his robe about him.

" It seemed safe," Montagno said, " and it will seem safe to you." He walked towards a low stone door. " I had three men standing here on guard. Even should they have been overpowered, the thieves would have emerged in full sight of Villefranche and myself and all of our staffs as we sat feasting. You see that ? "

" Indeed and indeed," the messenger said.

Montagno flung open the door and signalled to the two torch-bearing attendants. With the messenger following timorously behind, they descended a steep staircase, cut, the messenger guessed, from the very mountain on which Castello Montagno rested. When he had reached the foot of the staircase, he found himself in a low, dark, windowless room, lit only by the torches which they had brought with them.

" This was the room," Montagno said, " and there is but one other entrance to it."

" Ah ! " the messenger said.

Montagno glared at him contemptuously, and walked with his

quick wolf's tread to the far side of the room, with the guards scurrying after him. It seemed to the messenger that he had descended into some infernal pit, into the lair of some animal. He glanced apprehensively behind him, but the door leading to the staircase had been slammed shut from above.

Montagno had placed his strong, thick arms on the second door, which was of stone, and had been set inconspicuously into the wall, and pushed outwards. Instantly the room was flooded with sunlight, and the messenger, as he walked towards it, understood the count's snort of contempt.

For the door opened on to space, on to the sky and the sun, and beneath it was a sheer, straight drop of a thousand feet. The messenger found himself staring south where, hidden by the mist and by many miles, his brutal master, Cesare Borgia, was even now waiting for his report. The messenger shuddered, and fingered his long throat apprehensively.

"There you are," the count said with gloomy satisfaction. "Through the first door the thieves *did not* leave. Through the second door the thieves *could not* leave."

"That is impossible," the duke's messenger said. He backed away from the window, overcome by a fit of giddiness, and seated himself on a low stone bench.

"It *is* impossible, my dear sir—but it happened."

"It is impossible, and Villefranche will report that it is impossible," the messenger said tonelessly. "He will report that the emeralds had never been intended for the majesty of France."

"Yes," the count said. "That is what he would like to report. It is the news which the majesty of France would wish dearly to hear. But you and I know that it is not so."

"Then"—the messenger looked up sharply, and his face, the count noticed in some alarm, was that of a fox—"then it was a miracle. The emeralds vanished. They were an offering made jointly to the Virgin by Borgia and France. Another order of being, superior to the mortal, entered temporarily into our field of knowledge and then left it, leaving confusion where, had we but been immortal, there would have been pure reason. It is thus, barring my own lamentable ineptitude for metaphysics, that Saint Thomas defines a miracle."

He smiled deprecatingly, and the count, slamming the door shut, walked towards him.

"Would it not please France to learn," the messenger asked, "that his jewels, above all others, had been marked for heavenly appropriation?"

"No," the count said forcefully. "It would not."

"I was afraid not," the messenger said disconsolately.

"You are a fool," the count said, seating himself beside the messenger. "Borgia has sent me a fool."

"In the sight of God the foolish are often the wise. Italy, cursed by war, famine and plague, has cried for a miracle, and here we may give it to her."

"In the field of war," the count said, "there is no room for the miraculous. If the thieves could not or did not leave by either of the doors, then *they did not leave*!"

"But the emeralds—"

"The emeralds left," the count said. "Not the thieves, but the emeralds. They did not leave by the stairwell door, for that door was well guarded. They must have left by the wall door. They were lowered by rope—by one thousand feet of rope—to the foot of the mountains, and there they were carried off by the accomplices of the thieves."

"But if the thieves did not leave—"

"Then they remained. Is it not clear to you now, book-mouse? When we went into the treasure-room the two guards, and no one else, were in the room."

"But you said that the guards were dead."

"No. One guard was dead. His head had been severed from his body. The other guard was wounded, but he is not dead."

The messenger smiled bemusedly at the count.

"Then the second guard, the living one, was the thief?"

"Perhaps, but not of necessity. In war we examine carefully each possibility. When this room is unlighted, you notice that it is in total darkness. Now, is it not possible that the thieves slipped past the guards, attacked them, lowered the emeralds from the wall-door, then remained in the room until Villefranche and I descended with our staffs, and then, in the confusion, mingled themselves among us."

"Only," the messenger said slowly, becoming aware of the count's meaning, "only if the thieves were men wearing either your livery or Villefranche's."

"Exactly. There are, then, three possibilities. Either the guards lowered the jewels from the window and then, for a reason which we may learn, fought each other, or else the thieves were men under my orders—or Villefranche's."

"*How simple, it becomes so simple,*" the messenger said. "And this second guard?"

"Found beside his dead comrade, wounded and almost crazed."

"Too crazed to talk?"

"No, not too crazed to talk if he could."

"What do you mean?"

"Nofrio has been with the Montagno family from the moment

of his birth. And from that moment he has been a deaf mute."

The messenger stared.

"And now," the count said, "we may prepare to meet the Marquis of Villefranche and offer to him our solution."

"You have a solution ?" the messenger asked, and then stopped to grin. Unlike his usual expression of doleful misery, as though he sucked always upon a persimmon, his grin was oddly youthful. "Of course," he said. "Nofrio can write." He nodded. "We can direct our questions to him and he can write his answer."

"No," the count said, standing up and signalling the servants. "He cannot write a word. But still we have our solution."

"Truly," said the duke's messenger, "one must have the cunning of a wolf."

The Marquis of Villefranche played fretfully with a pom-pon saturated with scent. He could not stand the bestiality of North Italy, nor the savagery even of the nobility. This blunt, grim-visaged warlord, Montagno, for example. Even the tiny shrivelled clerk was preferable. He listened attentively, however, to Montagno's words.

If the words were not well-chosen, summer might find Castello Montagno in the hands of the majesty of France. A bagful of emeralds was a small price to pay for a legitimate provocation to war. Perhaps (the marquis blanched), perhaps it might even be his duty to take Montagno's place in this mouldering tomb.

"... and such, Villefranche," Montagno was saying, "such is the nature of the problem. You will forgive my suggestion that the theft might have been committed on your orders and by your men, but then I have accused myself equally. As a man of logic, you will realize that it is merely a formal exercise in which we indulge."

"Yes," said Villefranche languidly, "and all of it depends upon the testimony of an illiterate deaf mute and a dead man."

Montagno leaned towards him. They were in the room of justice of Castello Montagno. The count was seated in his chair of state, which had arm-rests carved in the images of avenging wolves. Villefranche sat beside him, and to one side the duke's messenger sat docilely upon a plain oaken bench.

"Yes," Montagno said, "the mute is illiterate, but not blind."

The pom-pon dropped from Villefranche's hand and rolled to the floor. The duke's messenger leaped up obsequiously, picked it up, and returned it. Villefranche snatched it petulantly.

"What do you mean ?"

"Just this. I have had Fra Dominico paint for me a series of pictures. Each picture portrays one of the possibilities. He has

merely to signify before us the correct way in which the theft occurred, and we will have our solution. Fra Dominico, who has long known the youth, has managed to convey to him, through signs, the nature of the test. And so, you see, we have no problem."

Villefranche bit his lip. "But," he said finally, "he would never incriminate himself."

Montagno grinned that terrible wolfish grin, and Villefranche drew back, not through fear, but through detestation of the vulgar.

"Nofrio has been prepared. You will see. Nofrio will be glad to speak the truth and end his misery one way or the other."

He nodded to the soldier behind him, who returned presently with a stout, brown-clad monk, bearing a number of sketches.

The count looked up towards the door. When the guards returned they brought with them what might once have been a man. The guards supported his sagging body. His chest was crisscrossed with lashes, and a terrible scar disfigured his face, running up into the blood-matted hair. Montagno grinned, and looked towards Villefranche. "He has been—prepared."

The messenger winced, and turned his eyes away, but Villefranche merely placed the pom-pon against his nostrils.

"I remember," Montagno said, and his voice was heavy and solemn in the room, "I remember when Nofrio was a child playing in the courtyard with the children of Castello Montagno. If he is innocent but can point to the guilty, I will protect him, whoever it incriminates." He gazed steadily at Villefranche. "I want that understood."

"It is understood," Villefranche said.

Montagno nodded to the monk, who drew forth the first sketch and held it towards Nofrio. It showed Nofrio and his dead comrade backed against the wall of the treasure-room, while soldiers, dressed in the Montagno livery and with drawn swords, carried the sack of emeralds to the wall-window.

"Poor Nofrio must think carefully," the count said, "for if he nods, then I will have all of my banquet squad executed."

Nofrio pushed his squat, heavy head forward, his wide, staring eyes fixed. Then, slowly, he shook his head.

The messenger relaxed, but Villefranche gripped the sides of his chair nervously.

The count looked carefully at Villefranche, and then motioned again to the monk. The second sketch portrayed much the same picture, save that the soldiers were dressed in the livery of France, the livery of the Marquis of Villefranche's retinue.

"Now here, you see," Montagno said, "we have an interesting situation. An embarrassing one, potentially."

" My God," Villefranche said, " this is an insult not to me but to all France ! If your peasant—"

" The innocent fear nothing before God or man," the messenger said in his rusty, pedantic voice, " and they never bother to protest."

Villefranche, his nostrils distended, glared for a moment at the messenger, and then all three men turned towards the prisoner.

" Watch Nofrio," the count said smoothly. " If the men were French he will nod—and there will be war ! "

But Nofrio was slowly, positively, shaking his head from side to side.

Villefranche relaxed then, and smiled at Montagno, but the count's face was that of a man accepting tragedy. Wordlessly he nodded to the monk, and Fra Dominico held up the third portrait. It was very different, for in this sketch Nofrio could clearly be seen standing at the wall-window, carefully lowering the sack of emeralds down the perilous mountainside to his unseen accomplices. It was the picture which would represent Nofrio's confession.

" Perhaps," Montagno said, " perhaps for Nofrio this is best of all, for it will end his troubles. He will escape the lash and the boot and the torture by water." The duke's messenger, watching the count, saw the face of a man who had looked upon much sorrow.

" Yes," Montagno said. " Nofrio will be set free." He took the torch from a servant behind him, and with the messenger walked towards the prisoner. Villefranche and the monk, carrying the third sketch, followed him. He held the torch a scant foot from the staring eyes.

Fra Dominico walked slowly to the prisoner and held the sketch before his wide, vacant, pain-drugged eyes.

The count rubbed the back of his hand across a forehead which was sweating in the cold room.

" Nofrio will be free," he said.

And then, slowly, sadly, without moving his eyes from the picture before him, Nofrio nodded.

" Man's justice has been done," the messenger said.

Villefranche turned to the count.

" I had not thought to find such wisdom in a soldier."

" One must have the cunning of a wolf," the messenger said, his scrawny hands thrust into the folds of his robe.

Montagno placed his hand on the prisoner's shoulder and then drew it away hastily, as though ashamed of such sentimentality. He turned to the guards.

" Take him out," he said. " See if he will reveal his accomplices. And if he will not, then kill him ! " He walked ponderously to the chair, his heavy shoulders sagging.

He kept his back turned, but the messenger, the marquis, and the monk stared with terrified fascination as the count's hand was replaced by the impersonal fingers of the guards.

They carried him backwards from the room, and his heels scraped on the cold stone. But before they had carried him more than a few feet, his mouth moved and the duke's messenger found himself staring into Nofrio's distended mouth, with its ragged stump of a tongue. Then suddenly and horribly the man released the hideous, jagged scream of the mute, half-animal and wholly inhuman. It emerged for an instant, and then Nofrio was silent and limp, and was taken away.

The count sat hunched in his chair, his shoulders sagging. Suddenly he was not a great *condottiere*, but a middle-aged man, a landlord. " He played when he was a child in the courtyard of Castello Montagno," he said.

The marquis, for once stripped of affectation, placed his hand on the count's. Then, realizing that he had seen the gesture performed recently, he jerked the hand away.

" The majesty of France will know of this," he said, " and that you executed a thief whom you loved in order to demonstrate the integrity of your dealings with France."

He turned and walked from the room, and the duke's messenger slipped out with him.

" This is a good country," the marquis said, freeing himself from terror by small talk.

" It can become a great one when it is freed from terror," the messenger said. He pressed his lips primly together. " When it is no longer the prey of wolves."

The marquis looked to the north, and in his mind he saw, beyond the mountains, the court of his sovereign.

"It will become great when it is unified beneath the banner of France."

But the scrawny messenger looked, with mingled hatred and admiration, towards the south, towards the brutal, corrupt court of his master, the lion of the plains, Cesare Borgia.

" By an Italian," he said softly.

Villefranche, once again himself, smiled disdainfully, and fingered his pom-pon. " You are a scholar," he said, " and live only with the abstract. Only strength is important."

" Yes," said the messenger sadly. " Only the strength of the lion and the cunning of the wolf."

" I deprecate," Villefranche said, to show that he, too, though a gentleman, was a scholar, " this growing idea of the nation. So long as there is strength and order, it does not matter whether the unifier is French or Italian."

" No," the duke's messenger said. " Not yet."
Villefranche looked back at the room behind them.
" I will report this," he said. " It is not an incident for war."
" Man's justice was done," the messenger said.
" But not God's ?"
The messenger shrugged his narrow, sloping shoulders.

Seated once more in his own study, with his scholar's cloak drawn about him, the duke's messenger felt a strange peace. Beside him, on his writing-table, lay his vellum-bound edition of Livy, and fresh paper and quills. Perhaps there would be a day, the messenger thought, when his name would echo through history as the greatest of all the translators of the Latin historians.

He took a sheet of foolscap, wet his pen, and wrote :

" To my beloved and worshipped lord and master, Cesare Borgia, Duke Valentin, Lion of Italy, Strong Sword of Christ. Greetings.

" Knowing full well the discrepancy which exists between the public and the private act, I beg leave of these few words to give to you a thought or two which my public report omitted. You may perhaps remember that in that report I expressed what I am sure is your own admiration for the effective way in which that wolf of the north, that scourge of the mountains, Montagno, Count of Castello Montagno, avenged the theft of your precious gift to the Majesty of France.

" And yet, that pedantry of mine, of which you have often spoken with such winning humour, that pedantry, I say, forces me to add to this picture.

" I travelled to Castello Montagno with but one thought in mind. The theft of the emeralds must, in no circumstances, be used by the French as the excuse for an invasion. Such an excuse, Count Montagno deprived them of. And so, in that sense, my mission was accomplished for me. I had not thought the count so clever.

" At first it seemed to me that he was not being clever at all. But then he knew that popinjay of a Villefranche as I did not.

" He knew that Villefranche would not question the wisdom of placing a deaf mute on guard duty. He knew that Villefranche would not question Nofrio's ability to distinguish between French and Italian livery in a pitch-black room. Those were his only risks.

" He made one mistake, it is true, but, fortunately, it passed Villefranche unnoticed. And the conception of the sketches was a master stroke, worthy of so redoubtable a strategist.

" And yet, not once, but twice, was Montagno given away—once through his folly, and once through that instability of the human

spirit which all great princes would be well advised to take within their thought. But of this Villefranche knew nothing.

" If you care, after reading this report, to do me the honour of re-reading my public report, you will notice that what so impressed poor Villefranche was the terrible scream of the deaf mute.

" Truly and unmistakably, it was the scream of a man possessing no normal powers of speech. Yet so tender were Villefranche's nerves that he did not notice, as I did, the mutilated stump of Nofrio's tongue.

" A torn, jagged stump of a tongue in the mouth of a man born a deaf mute ? Perhaps, but much more likely we saw in Nofrio a man whose tongue had been plucked out late in life. And were that so, it was at least possible that Nofrio, if he could not speak, could hear and understand.

" Since he was illiterate, he lived, save for his eyes, in a world where communication with his fellows was impossible. He could comprehend, but he could not speak back.

" If you will turn once again to your public report (and here I must again thank you for the great honour which you have done me in affixing *your* august signature to it), you will observe carefully the manner in which the test was made.

" The count had instructed us that Nofrio had been informed of the nature of the test and, hence, naturally, we had no desire to have the terms recapitulated when Nofrio was brought before us ; and the count did not do so.

" But mark—neither did he, at any time when Nofrio was in the room, so much as mention the sketches. True, as a deaf mute, it would have availed Nofrio nothing, but you and I now have reason to suspect that Nofrio was not deaf.

" Now mark further : When the first picture was brought forth, what did the count say. Did he say, ' Mark well this picture, wretched Nofrio ' ? No, he said merely, that if Nofrio's comrades-in-arms had taken the emeralds, they would be executed. And hearing those words, naturally Nofrio shook his head, for he knew his comrades were guiltless.

" And when the second picture was shown, again the count did not mention it. Merely he said that if the French had taken the jewels there would be war. And again Nofrio shook his head.

" But observe : when the third picture, which was to be his confession of guilt, was produced, Nofrio heard these strange words from the count : ' Nofrio will be free,' and eagerly, incredulously, the fool nodded yes, and in nodding, sealed his fate.

" But Nofrio had not taken the jewels. The jewels were, as you may have surmised, taken by the wolf of the north, Montagno of Castello Montagno. Presumably, sometime during the day, he

walked past the outer guards, killed Nofrio's comrade, and wounded the already muted Nofrio. We shall undoubtedly soon hear of those jewels appearing on the markets of England and the Germanies.

"How else, indeed and indeed, account for the count's elaborate ruse? Now were you not as clever as you are, you might by now be asking, 'Why did Nofrio nod when he saw the third picture?'"

"But such a question were madness coming from the lips of the tiger of the plains. You have realized, of course, the purpose of the maimed tongue, the purpose of the test, the purpose of the careful phrases. The lamentable fact is that *Nofrio never did admit his guilt.* Nofrio never saw the pictures. *Nofrio was blind.*

"I suspected this when I saw his vacant, staring eyes. I was almost sure when I saw that Fra Dominico placed the pictures before his eyes, rather than letting him turn his eyes towards them. And I was certain, indeed and indeed, when the count made that pointless, rash mistake: *when he held the torch a mere foot from those unflinching, unknowing eyes.*

"I like to think that Nofrio was blind from birth, and that the count's only cruelty had been a certain degree of cruelty, in which, of course, we all indulge, and then the matter of the tongue. And, indeed, how much more blind was Villefranche, for the truth was before him and before his sighted eyes, and he saw it not.

"But more important, the count has unwittingly delivered into our hands the proof of his potential perfidy, and of his financial insecurity, and of his desire to risk even the wrath of France in order to arm his barren, poverty-stricken lands without our knowledge. Perhaps indeed, he even contemplates using his new arms and men against your own person and power, but we are now forearmed. His cleverness has delivered him into our hands, and we may use him merely so long as we wish.

"As always, your grace, I throw myself prostrate at your feet, worshipping your wisdom and your strength.

"Your servant,

"*Niccolo Mächiavelli.*"

* * *

OFF THE PEG

A Suffolk man, who had left his native village many years ago and made a fortune in the New World, wrote asking his cousin to look for a suit of old English armour to add to his collection of antiques. She was offered one for £200, but her father advised caution.

"I shoon't send it," he said; "pay two hundred pounds for it and when that get there 'haps that 'on't fit him."

The Countryman

THE OPEN WINDOW

"Then you know nothing of my aunt's great tragedy?" asked the niece

by SAKI

"MY aunt will be down presently, Mr. Nuttel," said a very self-possessed young lady of fifteen; "in the meantime you must try and put up with me."

Framton Nuttel endeavoured to say the correct something which should duly flatter the niece of the moment without unduly discounting the aunt that was to come. Privately he doubted more than ever whether these formal visits on a succession of total strangers would do much towards helping the nerve cure which he was supposed to be undergoing.

"I know how it will be," his sister had said when he was preparing to migrate to this rural retreat; "you will bury yourself down there and not speak to a living soul, and your nerves will be worse than ever from moping. I shall just give you letters of introduction to all the people I know there. Some of them, as far as I can remember, were quite nice."

Framton wondered whether Mrs. Sappleton, the lady to whom he was presenting one of the letters of introduction, came into the nice division.

"Do you know many of the people round here?" asked the niece, when she judged that they had had sufficient silent communion.

"Hardly a soul," said Framton. "My sister was staying here, at the rectory, you know, some four years ago, and she gave me letters of introduction to some of the people here."

He made the last statement in a tone of distinct regret.

"Then you know practically nothing about my aunt?" pursued the self-possessed young lady.

"Only her name and address," admitted the caller. He was wondering whether Mrs. Sappleton was in the married or widowed state. An indefinable something about the room seemed to suggest masculine habitation.

"Her great tragedy happened just three years ago," said the child; "that would be since your sister's time."

"Her tragedy?" asked Framton; somehow in this restful country spot tragedies seemed out of place.

"You may wonder why we keep that window wide open on an October afternoon," said the niece, indicating a large French window that opened on to a lawn.

"It is quite warm for the time of the year," said Framton; "but has that window got anything to do with the tragedy?"

"Out through that window, three years ago to a day, her husband and her two young brothers went off for their day's shooting. They never came back. In crossing the moor to their favourite snipe-shooting ground they were all three engulfed in a treacherous piece of bog. It had been that dreadful wet summer, you know, and places that were safe in other years gave way suddenly without warning. Their bodies were never recovered. That was the dreadful part of it." Here the child's voice lost its self-possessed note and became falteringly human. "Poor aunt always thinks that they will come back some day, they and the little brown spaniel that was lost with them, and walk in at that window just as they used to do. That is why the window is kept open every evening till it is quite dusk. Poor dear aunt, she has often told me how they went out, her husband with his white waterproof coat over his arm, and Ronnie, her youngest brother, singing, 'Bertie, why do you bound?' as he always did to tease her, because she said it got on her nerves. Do you know, sometimes on still, quiet evenings like this, I almost get a creepy feeling that they will all walk in through that window—"

She broke off with a little shudder. It was a relief to Framton when the aunt bustled into the room with a whirl of apologies for being late in making her appearance.

"I hope Vera has been amusing you?" she said.

"She has been very interesting," said Framton.

"I hope you don't mind the open window," said Mrs. Sappleton briskly; "my husband and brothers will be home directly from shooting, and they always come in this way. They've been out for snipe in the marshes today, so they'll make a fine mess over my poor carpets. So like you men-folk, isn't it?"

She rattled on cheerfully about the shooting and the scarcity of birds, and the prospects for duck in the winter. To Framton it was all purely horrible. He made a desperate but only partially successful effort to turn the talk on to a less ghastly topic; he was conscious that his hostess was giving him only a fragment of her attention, and her eyes were constantly straying past him to the open window and the lawn beyond. It was certainly unfortunate that he should have paid his visit on this tragic anniversary.

"The doctors agree in ordering me complete rest, an absence of mental excitement, and avoidance of anything in the nature of violent physical exercise," announced Framton, who laboured under the tolerably wide-spread delusion that total strangers and chance

acquaintances are hungry for the least detail of one's ailments and infirmities, their cause and cure. " On the matter of diet they are not so much in agreement," he continued.

" No?" said Mrs. Sappleton, in a voice which only replaced a yawn at the last moment. Then she suddenly brightened into alert attention—but not to what Framton was saying.

" Here they are at last!" she cried. " Just in time for tea, and don't they look as if they were muddy up to the eyes!"

Framton shivered slightly and turned towards the niece with a look intended to convey sympathetic comprehension. The child was staring out through the open window with dazed horror in her eyes. In a chill shock of nameless fear Framton swung round in his seat and looked in the same direction.

In the deepening twilight three figures were walking across the lawn towards the window ; they all carried guns under their arms, and one of them was additionally burdened with a white coat hung over his shoulders. A tired brown spaniel kept close at their heels. Noiselessly they neared the house, and then a hoarse young voice chanted out of the dusk : " I said, ' Bertie, why do you bound ? ' "

Framton grabbed wildly at his stick and hat ; the hall door, the gravel drive, and the front gate were dimly noted stages in his headlong retreat. A cyclist coming along the road had to run into the hedge to avoid imminent collision.

" Here we are, my dear," said the bearer of the white mackintosh, coming in through the window ; " fairly muddy, but most of it's dry. Who was that who bolted out as we came up?"

" A most extraordinary man, a Mr. Nuttel," said Mrs. Sappleton; " could only talk about his illnesses, and dashed off without a word of goodbye or apology when you arrived. One would think he had seen a ghost."

" I expect it was the spaniel," said the niece calmly ; " he told me he had a horror of dogs. He was once hunted into a cemetery somewhere on the banks of the Ganges by a pack of pariah dogs, and had to spend the night in a newly dug grave with the creatures snarling and grinning and foaming just above him. Enough to make any one lose their nerve."

Romance at short notice was her speciality.

* * *

GARDEN SONG

Some insects feed on rosebuds,
And others feed on carrion.
Between them they devour the earth.
Bugs are totalitarian.

OGDEN NASH

ETERNAL WOMAN

An Enigma—

Are women saints? No saints, but yet no devils.
Are women good? Not good but needful evils;
So angel-like, that devils I do not doubt them,
So needful ills, that few can live without them.

Rapsody against Women, c. 1602, AUTHOR UNKNOWN

She Seeks Advice—

To The Editor,

I have long loved a young gentleman who, however, takes no notice of me. I have often thought of writing to him by an unknown hand but modesty forbade that, and to tell him is impossible. I have tried every way to conquer my unhappy passion but cannot; the more I try to hate him the more I love. Do give me your advice.

P.S.—Do not say you think he loves another, for that would drive me to distraction.

Letter to "THE LADY'S MAGAZINE," 1785–7

She Deceives—

Celia, we know, is sixty-five,
Yet Celia's face is seventeen;
Thus winter in her breast must live,
While summer in her face is seen.

ALEXANDER POPE, 1688–1744

She Attracts—

The Promenade was, except for its main attraction, a male preserve. And the attraction was the cream of the frail beauties of the town. That place had no counterpart. But middle-class young men rejoiced to pay their five shillings—a lot of money—to have the daring and bohemian thrill of a night spent in the Empire Promenade to watch the wicked ladies as they floated—none of them seemed to walk—to and fro; wonderful women wonderfully dressed, noiseless on the rich carpets, over-whelmingly alluring in their known

" naughtiness," yet rather frightening to youth as well, in an atmosphere of rich blue cigar smoke, frangipani, patchouli and the heady scent of champagne, whilst the sound of a wonderful orchestra from below made a fitting background.

Some of the more daring middle-class young men would encourage the sirens in conversation and even buy them a box of chocolates (which they immediately sold back to the girl behind the chocolate bar). They would observe, however, that after the first few words they were not very successful in holding the wicked lady's attention and that their eyes would roam elsewhere. These young women were quick in summing up anyone who meant real business. But the young men would boast of it for weeks and be regarded by their less reckless companions as desperate blades who knew life and were regular Don Juans. But very little harm came of it for the young men.

W. McQueen-Pope, *Twenty Shillings in the Pound*

She Is Courted—

Beware, fair maid, of musky courtiers' oaths ;
Take heed what gifts and favours you receive ;
Let not the fading gloss of silken clothes
Dazzle thy virtues, or thy fame bereave.
For loose but once the hold thou hast of grace,
Who will respect thy favour or thy face ?

John Donne, 1572-1631,
To The Young Gentlewomen

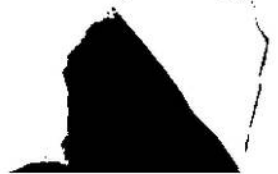
She Rejects—

So you saw me at the Circus on Saturday evening and you love me madly. What do you expect me to do about it ? I am unfaithful, it is true—and if those who love me do not like it, those whom I love are gratefully satisfied. But it is precisely because I am a " good naughty girl " that I advise you to work at your crammer's, to pass your exams, and to gain admission to St. Cyr. When that day comes, we will see about it. Until then, be sensible and do not dream too much about me.

Je vous caresse,

Cora Pearl.

A letter from Cora Pearl to Maurice Bonnemain, a student.
W. H. Holden, *The Pearl from Plymouth*



And Is Betrayed

" It was Mr. Thornhill who seduced me . . . Indeed, Sir, he owes all his triumph to the desire I had of making him, and not myself, happy. I knew that the ceremony of our marriage, which was privately performed by a popish priest, was no way binding, and that I had nothing to trust to but his honour."

"What!" interrupted I, " and were you indeed married by a priest, and in orders? . . . Why then, my child, come to my arms again; and now you are a thousand times more welcome than before; for you are his wife to all intents and purposes."

"Alas! papa," replied she, " you are but little acquainted with his villainies; he has been married already by the same priest, to six or eight wives more, who, like me, he has deceived and abandoned."

OLIVER GOLDSMITH, 1730-1774, *The Vicar of Wakefield*

In Her Is Sought Perfection—

O Woman! Lovely Woman! Nature made thee
To temper Man; we had been brutes without you;
Angels are painted fair to look like you:
There's in you all that we believe in Heav'n,
Amazing brightness, purity and truth,
Eternal joy and everlasting love.

THOMAS OTWAY, 1652-1685, *Venice Preserved*

And Imperfection

A Whoore is a highway to the Divell, hee that lookes upon her with desire, begins his voyage: he that staies to talke with her, mends his pace, and he who enjoys her, is at his journies end; her body is the tilted lees of pleasure, dasht over with a little decking to hold colour; tast her, she's dead, and falls upon the pallate . . . her trade is opposite to any other, for shee sets up without credit, and too much customee breaks her . . .

Shee will sell her smocke for cuffes, and so her shooes be fine, shee cares not though her stockings want feet. Her modesty is curiositie and her smell is one of her best ornaments. Shee passeth not a span bredth.

And to have done, she is the cook and the meat, dressing her selfe all day, to be tasted with the better appetite at night.

THOMAS OVERBURY, 1581-1613, *Characters*

HALF-WAY TO HELL

"The worst of it is," said the fiend, "we've got such a *human* of a way to go"

by JOHN COLLIER

LOUIS THURLOW, having decided to take his own life, felt that at least he might take his own time also. He consulted his passbook: there was a little over a hundred pounds left. "Very well," said he. "I'll get out of this flat, which stinks, and spend a really delightful week at Mutton's. I'll taste all the little pleasures just once more, to say good-bye to them."

He engaged his suite at Mutton's, where he kept the pageboys on the run. At one moment they had to rush round into Piccadilly to buy him chrysanthemums, in which to smell the oncoming autumn, which he would never see. Next they were sent to Soho to get him some French cigarettes, to put him in mind of a certain charming hotel which overlooked the Seine. He had also a little Manet sent round by the Neuilly Galleries—"To try living with," he said, with the most whimsical smile. You may be sure he ate and drank the very best: just a bite of this and a glass of that, he had so many farewells to take.

On the last night of all he telephoned Celia, whose voice he felt inclined to hear once more. He did not speak, of course, though he thought of saying, "You should really not keep on repeating 'Hallo', but say 'Good-bye.'" However, she had said that already and he had been taught never to sacrifice good taste to a bad *mot*.

He hung up the receiver, and opened the drawer in which he had stored his various purchases of veronal tablets.

"It seems a great deal to get down," he thought. "Everything is relative. I prided myself on not being one of those panic-stricken, crack-brained suicides who rush to burn out their guts with gulps of disinfectant; now it seems scarcely less civilized to end this pleasant week with twenty hard swallows and twenty sips of water. Still, life is like that. I'll take it easy."

Accordingly he arranged his pillows very comfortably, congratulated himself on his pyjamas, and propped up a photograph against his bedside clock.

"I have no appetite," he said. "I force myself to eat as a duty to my friends. There is no bore like a despairing lover." And

with that he began to toy with this last, light, plain little meal.

The tablets were not long in taking effect. Our hero closed his eyes. He put on a smile such as a man of taste would wish to wear when found in the morning. He shut off that engine which drives us from one moment to the next, and prepared to glide into the valley of the shadow.

The glide was a long one. He anticipated no landing, and was the more surprised to learn that there is no such thing as nothing, while there is quite definitely such a thing as being dead in the most comfortable bedroom in all Mutton's Hotel.

" Here I am," he said. " Dead ! In Mutton's Hotel ! "

The idea was novel enough to make him get out of bed at once. He noticed that his corpse remained there, and was glad to observe that the smile was still in place, and looked extremely well.

He strolled across to the mirror to see if his present face was capable of an equally subtle expression, but when he came to look in he saw nothing at all. Nevertheless he obviously had arms and legs, and he felt that he could still do his old trick with his eyebrows, from which he assumed that he was much the same, only different.

" I am just invisible," he said, " and in that there are certain advantages."

He decided to go out at once, in order to have a bit of fun. He went down the stairs, followed a departing guest through the revolving door, and in two minutes he was walking down Cork Street. It appeared to be just after midnight ; there was a bobby, a taxi or two, and a few ladies, none of whom took any notice of him at all.

He had not gone twenty yards, however, and was, as a matter of fact, just passing his tailor's, when a lean dark figure detached itself from the shadows which hung about the railings in front of the shop, and coming up close behind his elbow, said, " Damn and blast it, man, you *have* been a time ! "

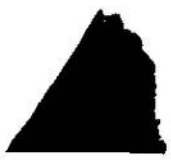
Louis was a little put out at finding himself not so invisible as he had thought. Still, he glanced at the stranger and saw that his eyes were as luminous as a cat's eyes, from which it was plain that he could see better than most.

" Do you mean," said Louis, " that I've been keeping you waiting ? "

" I've been hanging about here, freezing, for a week," said the stranger peevishly.

Now it was only September, and the nights, though nippy, were not as cold as all that. Louis put two and two together. " Is it possible," said he, " that you have been waiting to—to take me in charge, so to speak, on account of my recent suicide ? "

" I have," said the friend. " You'll come quietly, I suppose."



" My dear fellow," said Louis, " I know you have your duty to do, and in any case I'm not the sort of person to make a scene in the street. I'm sorry if I've kept you hanging about in the cold, but the truth is I had no idea of your existence, so I hope there'll be no ill-feeling."

" I've got an ill-feeling all right," replied the other, grumpily. " I swear I've got the 'flu, curse it ! " And with that he sneezed miserably. " The worst of it is," he added, " we've got such a *human* of a way to go. I shall be fit for nothing for weeks."

" Really, I can't bear to hear you sneeze like that," cried our hero. " Have you ever tried the Quetsch at the Rat Trap Club ? "

" What's Quetsch ? " asked the other, between sneezes.

" It tastes like liquid fire," replied Louis. " I believe it's made from plum-stones, though why I can't tell you. Possibly to cure your cold."

" Liquid fire, eh ? " observed the stranger, his eyes glowing like cigarette-ends.

" Come and try it," said Louis.

" I don't know," said the other. " We're a week late through your fault. I don't see why we shouldn't be half-an-hour later through mine. I suppose there'll be trouble if they hear of it."

Louis assured him that this last half-hour must be put down to his account also. " You caught the cold through my delay," said he. " Therefore I am responsible for the time you take to cure it." The fiend obviously believed this, which caused our hero to reflect that he must be a very simple fiend.

They set out for the Rat Trap Club. Passing through Piccadilly Circus, the fiend indicated the Underground, saying, " That's where I'm going to take you when we've had this drop of what-d'ye-call-it."

" That does not take you to Hell," said Louis, " but only to Baron's Court. The mistake is pardonable."

" No mistake," replied the fiend. " Let's cross the road this way, and I'll show you what I mean."

They went in, and travelled down the escalator, chatting very affably. It was fairly crowded with more ordinary passengers, but our friends attracted no attention whatever. There are a great many fiendish-looking individuals travelling on this subway, and others of a corpsy appearance. Besides, now I come to think of it, they were invisible.

When they had reached the ordinary lowest level, where the trains run, " Come," said the fiend, and drew Louis into a passage he had never before noticed, up which there came a huger clanking and a sultrier blast. He saw a notice saying, " Follow the wrong light." A few paces brought them to the top of an escalator such as

our hero had never dreamed of : it swooped down from under their feet with a roar and a groan, down into the close innards of the earth. Its passage was lit by the usual lamps. Louis, whose sight seemed to have become extremely keen, saw that at some far point on its vast curve, the black shades changed to blue, and the lamps gave place to stars. However, it seemed to go on the devil of a long way past that.

For the rest, it was made just like all other escalators : its sides were adorned with pictorial advertisements of temptations, some of which Louis thought might be very interesting. He could have stepped on, for there was no barrier or ticket-collector, but, as we have seen, he liked to take his time.

Now and then, he and his companion were jostled by other fiends and their charges. I am afraid some of the latter were behaving in rather an undignified manner, and had to be marched along in a sort of policeman's grip. The effect was degrading. Louis was interested to see, however, how tremendously the escalator accelerated once it felt the weight of these infernal policemen and their victims. It was a tremendous spectacle to see this narrow moving chain, dimly lit, roaring, rushing down, looping the distance between Earth and Hell, which is greater than one would imagine.

" What did you do before this sort of thing was invented ? " asked Louis.

" We had to leap down, like chamois, from star to star," replied the fiend.

" Splendid ! " said Louis. " Now let's go and have that drink."

The fiend consenting, they went off to the Rat Trap, and, slipping into a cubby-hole behind the bar, they helped themselves to a full bottle of the famous Quetsch. The fiend disdained a glass, and put the bottle to his lips, whereupon Louis saw, to his great amazement, this powerful form of brandy was actually brought to the boil. The fiend appeared to like it ; when the liquid was gone he sucked away at the bottle, the melting sides of which collapsed like the skin of a gooseberry sucked at by a child. When he had drawn it all into his mouth, he smiled, pursed his lips, and blew out the glass again, this time more like a cigarette-smoker exhaling his first puff. What's more, he didn't blow the glass into bottle shape as formerly, but into the most delightful statuary piece, most realistic, most amusing.

" Adam and Eve," said he laconically, placing it on the table to cool.

" Oh, very, very good ! " cried Louis. " Can you do Mars and Venus ? "

" Oh, yes," said the fiend. Louis immediately commandeered several more bottles of Quetsch.

He called for one or two other subjects, of a nature that would hardly interest the reader. The fiend, however, thought each more amusing than the last, and nearly split his sides over the effect of a hiccup on Lady Godiva. The fact is, he was getting rather tight. Louis encouraged him, not so much for the love of art as because he had no great desire to ride on that escalator.

At last the fiend could drink no more. He got up, jingled his money (fiends have money—that's where it's all gone to), puffed out his cheeks. "Whoop!" said he, with a hiccup. "My cold's better, I believe. If it isn't, well, then——to Hell with it! That's what I say. Ha! Ha!"

Louis, you maybe sure, told him he was a fine fellow. "Well," said he, as they stood on the steps of the Club, "I suppose you're going that way; I'm going this." He made a bit of a face, pleasantly, raised his hat, and set off along the street, scarcely daring to breathe till he had rounded the corner.

When he thought himself in safety, "By Jove," said he, "I'm well rid of that fellow. Here I am, dead, invisible, and the night is yet young. Shall I go and see what Celia's doing?"

Before he could embark on this rash project, he felt a very hard hand on his arm, looked round, and saw his custodian.

"Oh, there you are," said he. "I wondered where the devil you'd got to."

"Drunk as a lord," said the fiend, with a smile. "Got to see each other home, eh?"

There was nothing for it: they set out for Piccadilly Circus. The fiend kept his hand on Louis' wrist, quite inoffensively of course, only Louis would rather it had not been there.

So they went chatting into the subway again. Just as they got to the level of the Piccadilly line, which is where the infernal aperture gapes for those who are privileged to see it, whom should Louis see, in top-hat, white silk scarf, and all the rest, but his damned nasty rival, catching a late train home.

"I bet," said Louis at once, addressing the fiend, "that you are not strong enough to carry me on your back from here to the escalator."

The fiend, with a sneer of contempt, immediately bent down. Louis, with a desperate effort, picked hold of his rival round the waist and dumped him on the back of the fiend, who gripped his legs, and started off like a race-horse.

"Carry you all the way to Hell for tuppence!" cried he, in drunken pride.

"Done!" cried Louis, who was skipping along beside them to enjoy the spectacle.

He had the delicious pleasure of seeing them jump on the

escalator, whose terrific acceleration seemed even more marked and more admirable than before.

Louis returned to the street as happy as a king. He walked about for a bit, and suddenly decided to look in at Mutton's Hotel to see how his corpse was getting on.

He was rather annoyed to see, even as he stood looking at it, that the effective smile, over which he had taken so much trouble, was slipping. In fact it was beginning to look altogether idiotic. Without giving the matter a thought, he instinctively nipped inside to hook it back into place. In doing so he twitched his nose, found it necessary to sneeze, opened his eyes, and, in a word, found himself quite alive and no longer kicking, in that excellent bedroom of Mutton's Hotel.

" Well, upon my word!" said he, glancing at the bedside table. " Is it possible I dropped off to sleep after taking only two of those tablets ? There is really something to be said for taking one's time. It must have been just a vivid dream."

In short, he was glad to be alive, and still gladder a day or two afterwards, when some news came through that made it seem that it was not a dream after all. Louis' rival was announced as missing, having last been seen by two friends at the entrance of Piccadilly Circus Station shortly after midnight on Tuesday.

" Who'd have thought it?" said Louis. " Anyway, I suppose I had better go and see Celia."

However, he had learned the advantage of taking his time, and before he went he thought better of it, and, in fact, did not go at all, but went to Paris for the autumn, which shows that girls shouldn't play fast and loose with the affections of small men with blue eyes, or they may find themselves left in the lurch.

* * *

IN CAMERA

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THE LONG HARD DAY

"Wait, Eli," Kee whispered across the ditch. "Very hard, but we wait"

by EUGENE BURDICK

THEY lay side by side in the ditch. There were a few inches of water in the ditch. A thin layer of ice formed on the water and was pulled away by the soft current.

Eli could see his hand under the water; the blue skin was wrinkled, the thumbnail was dead-white; the veins stood out massive and purple. He tried to close his hand, and nothing happened. He squeezed again hard, and in the shimmering water he thought his fingers wavered and started to close, but then he had no more strength.

"My God," Eli thought, "the inside of my head feels like my hand looks, but that's just because I'm scared. Fear is just like the cold, just exactly."

He looked up and saw Kee's head close to his. There were only the two of them in the ditch. Two out of thirty. He wished suddenly he could cry. He was only eighteen; that was young enough to cry. Instead, he told himself to move before he froze.

With a delicate and quiet motion he heaved himself up. He curved his body into a bow of cold muscle and carefully brought his right eye to the edge of the ditch. Next to the ditch was a small hummock, perhaps six feet high. Nothing moved, and Eli could see no one, so he crawled up the hummock. Again, and more carefully, he brought his eye to the edge of the hummock and looked over it. They were still there. Twenty-five yards away in a grove of young trees were four trucks and fifteen Communist soldiers. They had bent the young trees down and woven them into an expert camouflage. Eli could barely make out the soldiers sitting on the running boards of the trucks and smoking.

As Eli watched, a two-wheeled wagon drawn by a pony came down the narrow road. It was loaded with howitzer shells cradled in hay. Following it was an enemy tank. The tank looked incredibly huge and dangerous. Eli felt the hair rise on his neck. The tank's gun was pointed down and it nosed along like some deadly prehistoric beast prowling a ruined landscape.

Two miles away was the main highway along which the Com-

munists were advancing. That road was solid with vehicles and troops. Every few minutes an American jet 'plane would come skimming into the valley at Eli's right, make a swooping climb, and then start a run along the highway. The vehicles would stop, the men would scatter. The 'plane would launch its rockets, and a few trucks would begin to burn. Most of the Communists would come back to the trucks, leaving a few tiny sprawled figures on the snow. The uninjured trucks would push the burning trucks aside. Like a vast brown indestructible worm, the column would start again down the highway.

High above the highway a slow-flying liaison 'plane was circling. This was the 'plane which directed the fire of the attacking jets. It flew in slow circles. Eli wished with a terrible intensity that he could signal the 'plane, ask it for help. He felt the tears of self-pity start into his eyes.

" I'm too young," he thought, " too young to die in this damn' gook country."

It began to get dark slowly, the blackness gathering in the mouths of the valley and then sliding gradually out into the plain. Eli pushed a bit higher, started to swing his eyes to the left, and then stopped.

" Go ahead," he told himself. " It's darker now. It won't be bad."

He could see them plainly. They were piled around the foot of the hummock. They looked like carelessly piled logs. Except that some of the logs ended in fingers, or clenched fists, or a GI boot. The piled bodies were motionless, turning stiff with the cold and four hours of death.

Eli heard a stirring in the ditch. He looked down and saw that Kee was grinning up at him. Kee always grinned, so it didn't mean anything. It was like a nervous twitch; Kee just could not get the soft, mechanical smile off of his face.

" Come down, U.S. private," Kee said.

Eli slid back into the ditch. Eight weeks ago, when Kee had been one of the South Koreans incorporated into Eli's company, he could not speak a word of English, and even now there were only a few words he knew. For some reason he had attached himself to Eli, and, although Eli had resented it at first, in a few days he had grown to like Kee and then to become dependent upon him. Kee was Korean and he knew how to live in Korea, even a Korea that was at war. He could look at a hill and tell if troops had passed over that day; he could cook rice with wood that made no smoke; he could dry hay, arrange it in layers inside a jacket, very carefully, and the jacket would keep you warm on a freezing night.

Once he had shown Eli how to load a rifle in a field which had only an eighteen-inch fringe of rice seedlings for cover. You rolled over on your back and laid the gun flat on your belly; without looking down, you ejected the old clip, put in a new one, rolled over on your belly again, and were ready to go. A little thing, but there were seven dead Americans in the field who had tried to reload by hunching up on their knees and jamming the clip in. Kee didn't learn these things, he just knew them. He made the small decisions, then the larger ones, and finally Eli felt restless when Kee was not around.

"Wait, Eli," Kee whispered. "Very hard, but we wait. Wait long time, maybe."

Eli felt his body relax quietly back into the icy water, felt it push into the soft layer of mud. He began to think of past days, and the fear he had felt for the last four hours began to soften somewhat.

He recalled events from the past year. The memories came like bubbles rising to the surface of his mind. Each memory held for just a few seconds and then faded away.

There was a day in Santa Barbara. It was just before he came overseas. All the family was sitting in the back garden. At the end of the lawn, oranges hung from waxy green trees. His father came out of the house and gave him a mug of beer.

"Well, here's to the soldier," he said in an embarrassed voice.

It was the first drink his father and he had ever shared. After the beer they had potato salad, sliced ham, salad eggs, a freezer of ice cream. The bubble of memory burst, and another came up from the black depths of his mind.

It was the unloading at Pusan. They stood at the rail of the ship, looking at the dirty town, the hordes of men, the mountains of equipment. A sergeant yelled at them, desperate with haste and fatigue.

"All right, gentlemen, let's go," he rasped. "Down that gangplank like a line of fat birds and on to those trucks. Hop, hop, hop. Come on, come on."

In five minutes they were off the ship and on the trucks and bouncing down a dusty road. The big, friendly ship got smaller and then vanished in the dust.

Dozens of other memories flooded across his mind, but when he finally came to the events of this morning and this afternoon his mind slowed down and went carefully over the day. It seemed improbable that so much had happened that day.

They had been captured that morning just north of Pyongyang. The Communists had come swirling up out of the snow and fallen on

them while they were still in their tents. They tried to fire, but the Communists were around them in waves and masses of yelling men. They were taken prisoner and loaded into trucks, and the ocean of Communists rolled off. There were thirty American and South Korean prisoners, and with fifteen guards they started for the rear.

Early that afternoon the trucks stopped in the grove of trees, well away from the main highway. The guards gave them a bag of withered apples, and the prisoners split them up, three to a man. The guards gathered around their lieutenant and began to argue in low voices. They argued for a few minutes before the lieutenant raised his voice sharply, shouted a few words, pointed down the highway and gesticulated. The rest of the Communists fell silent and nodded.

The Communists picked up sub-machine guns and began to fan out around the knot of prisoners. They made a sort of semi-circle around their captives. The prisoners shuffled together, staring at the guards. Some of them stopped eating, but a few kept munching on the apples. For a second they waited, the two groups facing one another in the cold silence of the Korean plain. Even then Eli felt no fear, only a sort of hungry, tired curiosity. The lieutenant sucked hard at a cigarette, threw the butt away, and then dropped his hand. The guns all started to fire at once.

Eli actually saw bullets hitting men in the front of the group. Tiny puffs of dust rose from their clothing. One man took a few steps towards the guards, and then his chest splashed with puffs of dust. The man spun in a circle, balanced erratically on one toe, and started slowly to collapse. In mid-fall his eyes glazed, and Eli knew he was dead.

It was in that second, in the time that the man's eyes glazed and turned dull white, that the fear came up in Eli. It came up out of his stomach like a green, bitter wave, so strong that he could taste it. He could feel the thud of the bullets hitting the men in front of him. He turned and started to run.

Kee and three other men turned and ran with him. In a few seconds they were running at top speed across the frozen fields. Behind them they could hear the sounds of the guns. Once an American started to swear, and his words trailed off in a strangle. Eli began to run even faster. He seemed to be running faster and more lightly than he ever had before. He came to a ditch and felt his body lift and sail easily over. He flew over a hedge, jumped another ditch.

" I can run faster than the bullets," he thought. In his great fear he actually believed it. He could hear the stitching of the guns, the yells, the deadly noises, but they had nothing to do with him.

He looked sideways and saw Kee's face, the eternal grin almost wiped off with the strain of running. By now they were almost a hundred yards away, and Eli began to feel a wild exultation.

Suddenly, however, the bullets began to come very close, making ugly whines in the cold air as they went by. He realized that the guards had finished with the rest and were firing at them now. The whines came closer and one of the men fell suddenly. Then another man was hit twice with a sound like a melon being cracked. Bullets slammed into the ground, struck small rocks, rocketed off into the sky.

In a dull second Eli realized that the speed and lightness were only illusions. He was really moving very slowly across the field. His heavy GI boots weighed him down, his breath burned a hot tube down his throat. It was like the nightmares he'd had when he was young—dreams of trying to escape from faceless horror. He seemed unable to move, felt as if he were trying to run through water. The skin on his back crawled as he anticipated the bullets.

He saw another ditch; they bore down on it slowly, and just as he was about to leap, Kee crashed into him and carried the two of them into the ditch. Above them the last American kept running for a few yards; then in a moment he caught the concentrated fire of all the guns. He fell in a long sprawl, white bits of undigested apple spluttering from his mouth. The bullets kicked up dust for a few more seconds and then the silence returned. Eli realized that it was Sullivan, a corporal whom he had known ever since he had landed in Korea.

Kee spun on his hands and knees; keeping low, he began to crawl down the ditch. Eli followed him. In a few yards they came to a ditch that cut across the one they were in, one branch leading back towards the trucks. Without hesitating, Kee took that turn. Eli reached out and grabbed his heels.

" Not towards the trucks, Kee," he said. " You're going towards them."

" Proper thing, surprise," Kee said calmly. " Very proper."

He was right, Eli thought. The Communists would expect them to take the opposite turn of the ditch. He wriggled off after Kee. Several times they went into other connecting ditches, but each time Kee took the one that led them closer to the trucks. Finally they were within twenty-five yards of the trucks. Kee stopped when they had the hummock between them and the Communists. The two of them lay flat in the ditch, so close to the trucks that they could hear the men talking.

For the rest of the afternoon they had been waiting, lying in the icy water, waiting for the Communists to move away . . .

The exertion of climbing the hummock had thawed his nearly frozen body. He could move the fingers of his hand now, and for several moments he opened them and closed them. The dead-white skin and the huge veins took on a pinkish colour as the blood flowed sluggishly back through his veins.

The exercise had also jarred loose the grip of the cold paralysing fear. It was still there in his stomach, a clutching pain that came whenever he thought of the Communists or the guns or the tank, but it was eased when he moved, when he took some action. He turned his head towards Kee and whispered, " Kee, how old are you ? "

Kee's face wrinkled in puzzlement for a moment. Eli repeated the question. Kee held up one finger, then all the fingers of one hand and the thumb of the other. He was sixteen years old.

" Look, Kee, listen hard," Eli said. " Were you scared this afternoon ? Scared ? Understand ? Scared ? "

Kee stared at him for a moment, and then Eli could tell he understood. The smile weakened on Kee's face, and suddenly Eli had his answer. Kee had been scared, but the smile was a sort of discipline, a way of keeping control. Eli reached out and patted Kee on the shoulder. It was a quick protective pat, almost paternal.

Eli rolled over on his back in the ditch ; he felt the icy water flow over the cloth, soak greedily through, and settle tenaciously against his skin. He looked up into the sky for a few moments.

Two years older than Kee, he said to himself. Two whole years. As he turned the words over in his mind, he felt a new sensation. It was part shame, part anger, part a sense of responsibility. It gnawed at the cold edges of his fear and dissolved part of it, in the way that the slowly moving stream consumed the thin layer of ice. As the fear receded, his mind began to work more clearly. He found himself considering new possibilities. Five minutes passed, and Eli finally rolled over and turned again towards Kee.

" Look, Kee, it's my baby now," he said. " You've done good so far, but if I ever want to get back to Santa Barbara and you want to get to Kwanti, I'd better get going." Kee could understand none of it, but Eli went on. Occasionally the fear came flickering back up, but with a careful, deliberate act of mind he ignored it. " This is a high-powered affair, Kee. You did good, but this is something special. Now just relax and let me give it a try."

Eli pulled himself to his knees in the ditch. He began to work his hands savagely, opening and closing them. Hot flashes of pain jerked up the frozen muscles, but he stayed at it. When his hands

were limber, he began to spread cold mud over his clothes and across his face. The mud smelled—that rotten odour of Korea: the odour of fertilizer, of sour vegetation, of oldness. Finally he was completely covered. Even his face had a half-inch layer of the mud over it.

He began crawling back down the pattern of ditches, back to the point where Kee and he had dived into the ditch and Sullivan had been shot. When he reached the point, he hesitated a moment. Then, with a gentle push, he brought his body out of the ditch. He was now in full view of the Communists, but in the late afternoon light, and covered with mud, he knew that he must blend into the earth. He restrained his movements so that he never moved in jerks. With a slow, excruciating wiggle he moved toward Sullivan's body. He moved like a piece of slowly shifting earth.

It took him ten minutes to crawl the ten yards to Sullivan's body. When he reached it, he rolled over on his back. With his eyes on the grove, he began to feel over Sullivan's body, into the pockets, inside the shirt, around the neck. Once there was a disturbance in the grove; the saplings parted, and a head pushed out and looked around. Eli stiffened into absolute rigidity. But the Communist was only looking at the circling liaison 'plane.

Finally Eli's hands touched a tube of cold metal fastened to Sullivan's belt. It was an electric torch, and it was this he had come back for. With soft, gentle movements Eli fastened it to his own belt and then began to crawl back to the ditch. He reached it safely, slid into the cold water and mud again, and crawled to the protection of the hummock.

He took off his jacket, tore the sleeve off, and arranged the cuff of the sleeve around the torch. The rest of the sleeve stretched out in a long tube beyond it. This was an adaptation of the flash deflector on guns which makes the flash invisible to anyone who is not directly in front of the muzzle. Now he could aim the torch without the Communists seeing it. He pulled himself back up to the edge of the ditch, searched the sky for the 'plane, and finally saw it. He aimed the sleeve with his left hand, and with his right he began to blink out HELP in Morse code.

For five minutes the little 'plane circled without a change in its pattern. Then, almost imperceptibly, the 'plane was nearer. It lost altitude, came close down over the hummock, then pulled back and struggled for more altitude. In the grove, the Communists began to move around excitedly. Eli knew with a cold certainty that if he did not convince the pilot of the 'plane that

he was an American, he would die. His finger shook momentarily on the flash button.

Suddenly the 'plane veered back and a light began to blink down from it in Morse.

WHO LOVES LIL ABNER ? the 'plane blinked.

For a moment Eli could not make sense of the words ; the trembling spread from his fingers to his arms. Then the answer came easily, his hands tightened, and he blinked back two words : DAISY MAE.

WHAT YOU WANT US DO ? the 'plane blinked quickly.

BOMB GROVE TWENTY FIVE YARDS WEST OF US, Eli sent.

MAY USE NAPALM BOMBS. DANGEROUS FOR YOU.

BOMB AWAY.

The tiny 'plane did not bother to reply. The tempo of its engine changed and it started to bank and gain height. For several moments nothing happened. Then Eli could feel the tempo of the sound in the valley change. The long smooth arc of the jets was suddenly broken. The 'plane was directing them down the secondary road beside the ditch.

Eli could see the first one coming. Its nose grew from a shiny speck to a huge glistening knob. Its engine seemed to suck in all the air in the valley, condensing it into a howling power that wailed out behind the 'plane. The 'plane did not fire. It was looking over the grove first. Two more jets followed it, holding their fire.

Then the first jet came back. This time it seemed to be going slower. A half mile away the innocent looking black tubes under its wings shot forward, a red flame showing at the back of each rocket. Eli was conscious of a high whinnying noise for a brief second. Then the rockets hit the grove. A row of trees collapsed in a red, shattering flash ; two of the trucks reared up, held together for a moment, and then split into fragments. The body of one of the Communists turned over in the air like a tossed doll and fell back into the ruined, burning truck. A faulty rocket failed to detonate and went jarring down the road at an incredible speed, striking sparks from stones, and finally tore itself into shreds.

The guards began to pile into the two remaining trucks. The truck started and began to work through the grove towards the road. But the grove had been blasted open, and their movements were seen from the sky. A second jet came powering down the valley. A hundred yards away it released one of the big napalm bombs from its wings.

These were bombs of jellied gasoline. They exploded into

burning, sticky fragments which consumed themselves at an incredibly high temperature. Eli felt his stomach contract as the bomb slanted towards the ground and landed just in front of the two trucks. In front of the bomb a thin tongue of flame lashed out and seared into the grove. Behind it rose a wave of fire which hung for a moment and then whooshed forward, engulfing the grove and the truck and the Communists. Edges of the wave of fire rolled up to the hummock behind which Kee and Eli were watching the attack.

They threw themselves backward, but only a few blobs of napalm flew over their heads and hissed out in the water in the ditch. Eli and Kee climbed back up the hummock. Three times Eli saw men run out of the lake of fire, pawing at sightless eyes, their screams lost in the roar of the burning. Each time they collapsed at the edge of the fire.

In a few minutes the jets were high in the sky, circling watchfully. The fire in the grove died rapidly; finally only the tyres and seats of the trucks were burning. Everything else had been charred black. Eli and Kee walked around the hummock and stood in the road.

Five minutes later a helicopter came down the valley. Its ugly beetle shape hung in the air, occasionally shifting sideways as the liaison 'plane directed it down on them. It came down directly over their grove. The wind from its rotors revived parts of the fire; a few trees burst into flames again, a truck burned fitfully, black cinders swirled around Kee and Eli. The helicopter slid away from the grove and hovered a few feet off the ground. Eli and Kee climbed aboard.

The pilot of the helicopter was a young Marine lieutenant, whose eyes were bloodshot with fatigue. He had a cigar stub in his mouth and he chewed at it vigorously, as if it could give him some sort of nourishment. He looked sideways at them as he lifted the 'plane straight into the sky.

"Hard day, huh?" he said.

"Yep, a long hard day," Eli said.

Had it really been only one day? he thought. Could all this have happened in one day? The day seemed to stretch out impossibly long, to reach back into the years of his life, even to extend into the future.

"Is it bad back there?" Eli asked, pointing towards the south where the American troops were retreating.

"Yep. Real bad."

The young pilot looked at Eli, judging him.

"Where will we land?" Eli asked.

" Just behind our own lines. They need help, and I got three more rescues to make. They'll give you a gun back there."

Eli felt the fear start again, felt it rage up out of his stomach. But now it was familiar and old. He fought it back and was calm. He knew it would always be there, but that it could always be subdued, kept small.

" I'd better get some sleep, then," Eli said.

" Sorry, Mac," the pilot said, and this time his smile was friendly.

It was warm in the cabin ; in the gathering darkness, the green glow of the cabin lights was soft. In the light Eli could see that Kee was still grinning, looking down over his land as it slid by. Eli reached out and shook Kee's hand. Kee was not even startled. He shook hands calmly, the expression of his face unchanging. Then the two of them leaned back in the corners of the cabin and fell asleep.

* * *

ANSWERS to YO-HO-HO! on page 24

1. *Captain Jas Hook in " Peter Pan," by J. M. Barrie.*
2. *The Gentlemen in " A Smuggler's Song," by Rudyard Kipling.*
3. *Long John Silver in " Treasure Island," by R. L. Stevenson.*
4. *Sir Ralph the Rover in " The Inchcape Rock," by Robert Southey.*
5. *The Pirates who took Hamlet prisoner in " Hamlet," by William Shakespeare.*
6. *Frederic in " The Pirates of Penzance," by W. S. Gilbert.*
7. *Joss Merlyn in " Jamaica Inn," by Daphne du Maurier.*
8. *The Highwayman in the poem of that name, by Alfred Noyes.*
9. *Captain Macheath, the highwayman, in " The Beggar's Opera " by John Gay.*

* * *

SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD on page 160

Across.—1, Seamanship. 9, Lunn. 10, Stradivari. 11, Nibble. 12, Erect. 15, Hosea. 18, Sprat. 19, Vitiate. 20, Moose. 21, In ice. 22, Refrain. 23, Trent. 24, Ellis. 26, Paced. 29, Retina. 31, Triangular. 32, Sack. 33, High Street.

Down.—2, Eats. 3, Mealie. 4, Naïve. 5, Heave. 6, Print. 7, Lumber mill. 8, Intentness. 13, Ratafia. 14, Charade. 15, Home thrust. 16, Smoke-stack. 17, Avert. 18, Seine. 25, Liquor. 26, Patch. 27, Cling. 28, Denis. 30, Cape.

THE ASPIRING PIG

Life had played him a cruel trick

by JOHN INGLIS HALL

"BUT you must come down, if only to meet our pig," said Alan to me over the 'phone. "He suffers from delusions too. You believe you are a writer. He thinks he is a red setter—and it's just possible that you may both be right. If you believe in anything sufficiently strongly, it is true."

Alan, by the same token, believes he is a farmer in Gloucestershire, living in a small Elizabethan manor house. It is true that, in some curious way, he does just manage to farm his land, but he is a professional fantast as much as a farmer. His real interest in the world is seeing that the apparently impossible takes place often, preferably in public. In this he is encouraged by his wife Kate who follows the flights of his imagination with the skill of a ballroom dancer landed with an eccentric but talented partner.

It is my firm belief that Alan knows nobody. He does not need to. He even invents the personalities of his best friends. In fact I often feel embarrassingly commonplace when he introduces me to someone who displays an extraordinary interest in me, because I sense that he may have whispered to them a moment before, "You must meet him. He was once a lift boy in the Kremlin," or, "One day, remind me to tell you about the extraordinary thing he did last year in the Simplon tunnel."

Thus, with a single chosen sentence, he clothes one in the armour of mystery, and all the evening it is polished by people's curiosity until, in spite of the inborn, stubborn dullness of common metal, it shines.

When confronted with Alan's telephonic pig, I assumed at once that he had invented him, wantonly, for reasons of his own.

"A red setter?" I said. "Tell me something new, Alan, something less ordinary. I never knew a pig in my life that didn't believe it was something else. Never. I won't stir from London for a tale like that. I'm too busy."

Down the 'phone, Alan sighed. His sigh tore through Cheltenham, across Salisbury Plain to Marlborough, through Reading and into London by the Great West Road—all in under a second. It was a patient sigh.

" Sometimes," he said sadly, " Kate and I get the impression that you don't believe some of the things I say. I tell you, Jack, we have a pig that thinks he's a red setter. He is also a beautiful and touching character. We call him Pog the Grig. Kate's thinking of teaching him to play the piano when he gets too big to be a gundog or a gunpig, whichever you prefer. Then we shall sell him to a circus. In my view he is one of the outstanding pig-intellects of our times," said Alan.

Eventually, of course, I gave in, and the following Friday, I was walking up from White Aston station, first across the rich, brown, turned ploughland, fragrant and wholesome as plum cake, then over the stile into the autumn wood at the far side of which, reached by its own lane, lies the Manor Farm. I whistled to myself, for I was gay at the thought of a weekend crossing swords with Alan. He has the genius for fooling which proceeds from a full mind, fancies which gain point from being often profound, the spark of humanity, the heart for pathos, and with it all, the art of clothing his thoughts in simple, telling words.

Just inside the wood, I knew that Alan had achieved the impossible. He had told me the truth! A hundred yards away I heard the sudden bang of a twelve-bore, followed by the excited whimper and rustle of working gundogs. Then, a minute later, a five month old porker tore out of the undergrowth to the right of the path, and in his mouth he held a pheasant! There was a low whistle, he turned in his tracks and dashed away, closely followed by Corks and Fancy, Alan's two red setters.

A moment afterwards, Alan himself emerged from the bushes. The deliberate caricature of a country gentleman, he wore a hairy brown tweed coat with deep slit sides, cord breeches and canvas leggings. There was a shotgun under his arm.

" What did I tell you, Jack? " he cried triumphantly as we shook hands. " Business is ruining you. You are getting to think that truth is something exact, like five per cent on gross turnover. It's not. It shifts like the pebbles on the beach. This pig is true—true as the unicorn. Let's go in to tea."

As we walked together through the autumn wood, tinged with red and brown, bittersweet with fallen leaves, before us gambolled and played, as setters do, the pig and his two companions. Entering the garden by a wicket gate, Alan called them to heel, and with the mighty decorum of well-trained dogs they walked across the springy lawn behind us.

Inside the house, Kate greeted us in front of the big log fire in the sitting room. She is half Spanish, dark, with a subtle smile—a woman in whom the fire of happiness and contentment burns. It is a rest to be in her house, because in it everything works. In

spite of doing it all herself, with the aid of one very old family servant, nothing for your comfort is forgotten. There is a hot waterbottle in your bed, a fire in your bedroom. Her cooking is perfect, deriving from France, Spain and Italy. It is to be in the land of miracles to stay with Kate and Alan Garnett at the Manor Farm.

Tea was ready—warm scones, farm butter and honey. While she served us, she took no notice of the dogs and the pig, who took up their warm dog places on the sheepskin rug in front of the fire. Kate and Alan had evidently made the maddening decision to say nothing to me about the pig until I was fairly bursting with curiosity. Had it been a lion, a tiger, a dromedary, in front of us on the hearthrug, it would have been just the same. They would still have plied me urbanely with scones, honey and Earl Grey, and told me how Bunty and Charles, their two sons, had played a flute and oboe duet at their school concert and received a special prize at the hands of the Bishop of Hawley.

At last, I said, " Now Kate, this pig ! I want to know more about it. You're holding back on me."

They both pealed with laughter.

" Hush ! " said Kate, in her deep voice. " You shall. But don't you be so sure of yourself when you call him a pig. You see, he is now very nearly not a pig at all. In fact, he's about as near to being a dog as a pig ever got. Look ! "

Among the pile of sleeping dogs, the pig lay, back to the fire, inert, sighing and grunting occasionally with sheer pleasure at the warmth. But one beady eye was open, fixed on us. His expression was that of an expectant dog, waiting for a sign.

" Pog ! " called Alan. " Tricks ! Sugar, Pog ! "

The pig leaped to its feet, the picture of an excited dog whose soul had been accidentally translated into a pig's body. He gambolled in a porcine-red-setterish way, then suddenly he barked. When I say barked, I do not quite mean barked. He produced what I would call a very exceptional pig sound in a dog context, or *vice versa*. It was the sort of sound one would expect of an Englishman with little linguistic talent who had spent a lifetime in the Far East, were he to swear in Chinese. The other dogs scattered to avoid being trampled under foot, and Kate protected her cake stands.

Alan took a lump of sugar, while the pig sat up on his haunches like a dog and, with the utmost satisfaction, begged, caught the sugar when it was thrown to him, and sat down triumphantly, amidst applause. I thought I saw one of the red setters give a wry smile and shrug his shoulders in a hopeless sort of way, but I may have been mistaken.

" Well ? " queried Kate. " What do you think ? "

" Tell me," I said, " did you teach him to become a dog, or did he decide to become a dog himself and apply to you for lessons ? Or did he come to you one morning and say ' Alan ' or 'Kate,' as the case might be, ' I'm about to become a red setter. Will you take me off bacon strength and put me on household strength with my new mates ? ' "

" As a matter of fact," said Alan, " it was partly us and partly Pog. One might say he showed an early talent for dog impersonation, and we developed it. But when we began this, it never occurred to us that there would eventually be the problem of what on earth to do with a dog in pig's clothing. You see, he's getting bigger and bigger, and the house remains the same size. He's perfectly clean. Barks or grunts, or whatever you call it, to be let out, morning and evening, but he's getting heavy—one day he's going to slip coming down the polished wooden stairs from our bedroom and break a leg. Then, heaven help us, we'd have to shoot him."

Alan looked grave.

" You mean to say he sleeps in your room ? " I exclaimed.

Kate nodded her head.

" Always has," she said, " with Corks and Fancy—and now we can't bring ourselves to put him out in the fields or in a sty. It would be like suddenly turning one's grandmother out to grass in midwinter."

" Actually," said Alan, " the situation, from being comical, is becoming pathetic. In fact, we decided that because of your experience in business in the Middle East you might know something about pig psychology and would advise us."

" Unworthy of you, Alan," I said.

" He doesn't mean it. A poor gambit," said Kate, defending him. " You know he loves businessmen, too—even from the Middle East. I never met a kinder, more harmless, less cynical man in my life than Alan. That was a nasty little boy's remark, and he should be scolded for it."

" I repent," said Alan. " *Mea culpa* ! But it's true. We were going to ask your advice."

" Go ahead, then," I said. " Perhaps, when I get back to London I could take a man I know out to lunch and ask him, as a psychologist, what he would do. He should be interested to have such an exceptional patient, even by proxy—and one with such an extraordinary complaint, too. He might even write about it in one of the psychological journals, if only he weren't so damned serious and as queer himself as most of the people he treats."

Then Alan sat back in his armchair and told us Pog's story

from the beginning. His largest and favourite sow—he has favourites among all his animals, not based on pedigree or productivity, but on qualities of the soul which he fancies he detects in them—farrowed what was for the Manor Farm a record litter of thirteen. In the way of nature, Champion Marietta the Third of White Aston, in common with the rest of her kind, was not equipped to feed them all.

Consequently, on about the second day, the grig declared itself to the sympathetic and kindly eyes of Alan and Kate. He was the odd man out, and stood, disconsolate, on the edge of all earthly bliss, a depressed, shivering starveling. His lively brothers and sisters pushed and jostled and stuffed themselves at the spurting fountains of life, changing places, squeaking and grunting with happiness, but always finding time to kick and shove the weakling as they pushed past him.

At this point Kate interrupted to swear that she saw him break down and cry, like any Disney pigling, as he stood neglected, outside the magic circle representing warm food and a full belly, the sum of all known infant delights. So they picked him up from the sty, took him to the kitchen and fed him from a bottle. He soon grew lively, affectionate and humorous of face, as little pigs often do, and on the fifth day, in the evening, he was found asleep in the great wickerwork basket belonging to Fancy, the red setter bitch. She had recently lost her pups, and very soon indicated to Kate and Alan that she had adopted the poor little grig, and that, from then on, she was taking full responsibility.

" Fancy's an exceptional mother," said Alan. " Evidently she was distressed to see a young animal so completely un-doglike, which, I suppose, to her meant what we would call ' badly brought up.' So she trained him. After four weeks, there was no question about it. He was getting the general education and outlook of a red setter—and thriving on it."

So far, I found all this delightful, just like a fairy tale.

" And then ? " I asked.

" Then we put our minds to the situation, and started to pile up trouble for ourselves," continued Alan. " We were confronted with a pig which, within certain obvious limitations, was showing tremendous talent as a dog. We couldn't resist playing the fool with his future. We decided to support his delusion by every means in our power. He was never to see another pig, or even a looking glass. He was always to go out with the dogs, hunt with the dogs, play with the dogs, sleep with the dogs. In fact, we applied all our considerable imagination to confirming his beliefs about himself—and we succeeded."

He sighed, partly with contentment over a ridiculous, wholly

unnecessary and impossible task well done, partly sorrowfully, on account of the unhappiness he felt it must eventually cause.

" Corks soon taught him about trees and doorposts and such-like," said Kate, grinning slyly. " I think Pog first lifted his leg when he was about eight weeks old. Alan saw it, and we spent a whole morning stalking him with a camera. Here are the results."

She handed me a remarkable picture gallery—probably one of the most remarkable photographic records in the world of what is generally considered to be a rather unphotogenic physical function.

I whistled.

" What an athlete ! " I cried. " What talent ! What poise ! "

Then Alan described how he began to take Pog out shooting, and how, soon after the opening of the pheasant season, guided by Corks and Fancy, he triumphantly retrieved his first bird. This brought us to the point where I met Pog in the wood on my way from White Aston station, when he was the complete, experienced gunpig, delighting in his work, but already the size of a wild boar, and growing fast.

For the rest of the weekend we discussed, sometimes sadly, sometimes gaily, the fate of poor Pog. We discussed him over breakfast. We discussed him as he dashed over the fields and far away with his red setter foster-relatives, chasing rabbits and putting up game. We discussed him over lunch and tea and dinner, seriously, and yet taking a holiday from gravity. In the end we made up our minds.

The time had come when Pog must either become a freak for the rest of his life, or be permitted to revert gradually to pig. A growing piglet with the enthusiasms and outlook of a red setter is just—in Alan's house—possible. But for a full-grown male middle-white, equipped with those same enthusiasms, there is no place in anyone's house. And this was the situation which, in a few months' time, had to be faced.

By Sunday night we had decided that Alan and Kate, with their great sympathy for the animal world, must harden their hearts and gradually introduce him to life in the piggery, remembering all his sensibilities, softening the blow by means of frequent visits to his sty, conversations, and outings in the woods with Corks and Fancy, say, twice a week.

I left for London on the Monday morning, and thereafter Alan and Kate reported progress to me over the telephone.

Our scheme was a miserable failure. From the first, Pog pined. He loathed his modern, hygienic, impersonal sty, as anyone would who had spent his formative months in an Elizabethan manor house, sleeping in a warm bedroom or before a blazing log fire,

and going rabbit hunting in the afternoons with a pack of red setters. This was the first disaster. Then Alan and Kate, after a week of difficulty and nursing, made a further error. They decided, out of the kindness of their hearts, doubtless basing their judgment on the supreme success of their own marriage, that Pog was pining for company, and should be introduced to other pigs, particularly to lady pigs. It was this that killed him.

When he first saw another pig—the first since he was born—Kate and Alan say he was visibly affected. He loathed it. And when eventually a charming and eligible young sow was introduced into his sty, he was utterly aghast at having to live with a beast so frightful. In fact, during their first evening together, he could not bear it and broke out. Days later, they caught him in the woods, thin and miserable, and put him back. On the morning after this escapade they found him dead in his sty.

It may have been that he ate some poisonous plant in the woods during his outing. This seems to me the true explanation. For Alan, however, it will not do. He declares that Pog's susceptibilities were very delicate, his sense of beauty profound, and that his realization of the ugliness of his own kind so overcame him that he died of a broken heart.

* * *

WHERE THY TREASURE IS

"O LORD, Thou knowest that I have nine houses in the city of London, and likewise that I have lately purchased an estate in fee-simple in the county of Essex. Lord, I beseech Thee to preserve the two counties of Essex and Middlesex from fires and earthquakes; and as I have a mortgage in Hertfordshire, I beg Thee likewise to have an eye of compassion on that county. And, Lord, for the rest of the counties, Thou mayest deal with them as Thou art pleased.

"O Lord, enable the Bank to answer all their bills, and make all my debtors good men. Give a prosperous voyage and return to the 'Mermaid' sloop, which I have insured; and Lord, Thou hast said, 'That the days of the wicked are short,' and I trust Thou wilt not forget Thy promises, having purchased an estate in reversion of Sir J. P., a profligate young man. Lord, keep our funds from sinking; and if it be Thy will, let there be no 'sinking' fund. Keep my son Caleb out of evil company, and from gaming-houses. And sanctify, O Lord, this night to me, by preserving me from thieves and fire, and make my servant honest and careful, whilst I, Thy servant, lie down in Thee, O Lord. Amen."

17th Century Prayer

HEAVENLY GIFT

So it falls that all men are
With fine weather happier far

KING ALFRED, *Poems*

Upon Monday last the 12th of this moneth, here was such an extreme thunder lightning and raine, as the like hath seldome bene seene, and much hurt done thereby; the church wall at St. Andrewes in Holborne fell all down but noe hurt done, and I myself did see 12 or 14 coffins uncovered by the same; an other church wall at Bishopsgate, and there the people that were dead taken out of their graves by the violence of the water and swim up and downe the streets, and it was saide that there was a spirit at the same time seene upon the waters which did sore affright all the beholders.

HENRY WICLIFFE, *in a letter to George Falcon*, 1626

Summer Sunrise

See, how at once the bright-effulgent Sun,
Rising direct, swift chases from the Sky
The short-liv'd Twilight; and with ardent Blaze
Looks gayly fierce o'er all the dazzling Air.

JAMES THOMSON, 1834-1882, *The Seasons*

You Take It From Me

I have been a good deal worried today about the question of what luggage to take with me. I met a man this morning, and he said: "Oh, if you are going to Ober-Ammergau, mind you take plenty of warm clothing with you. You'll need all your *winter* things up there."

He said that a friend of his had gone up there some years ago, and had not taken enough warm things with him, and had caught a chill there, and had come home and died. He said: "You be guided by me, and take plenty of warm things with you."

I met another man later on, and he said: "I hear you are going abroad. Now, tell me, what part of Europe are you going to?"

I replied that I thought it was somewhere about the middle. He said: "Well, now, you take my advice, and get a calico suit and

a sunshade. Never mind the look of the thing. You be comfortable. You've no idea of the heat on the Continent at this time of the year. English people will persist in travelling about the Continent in the same stuffy clothes that they wear at home. That's how so many of them get sunstroke, and are ruined for life."

JEROME K. JEROME, 1859-1927, *Diary of a Pilgrimage*

Mid-Summer Storm

The sun shone out, and all the clouds drew near
And wondered what the sun was driving at.
When one fell cloud, as black as ancient beer,
Gnarled like old bog-oak, raised his mildewed hat,
Assumed an attitude of brooding doom
And loosed a clap of thunder . . .

Author Unknown

Judges' Wigs

I saw, beginning to poke up over the South Downs, several parcels of those white, curled clouds that we call " Judges' Wigs ". And they are just like judges' wigs. Not the *parson-like* things which the judges wear when they have to listen to the dull wrangling and duller jests of the lawyers ; but those *big* wigs which hang down about their shoulders, when they are about to tell you a little of their intentions, and when their very looks say, " Stand clear ! " These clouds (if rising from the south-west) hold precisely the same language to the great-coatless traveller. Rain is *sure* to follow them.

WILLIAM COBBETT, 1762-1835, *Rural Rides*

When Doctors Disagree

" Well, Duncombe, how will be the weather ? "
" Sir, it looks cloudy altogether ;
And coming across our Houghton Green,
I stopped and talked with old Frank Beane.
While we stood there, sir, old Jan Swain
Went by, and said he knowed 'twould rain ;
The next that came was Master Hunt,
And he declared he knew it wouldn't ;
And then I met with Farmer Blow—
He plainly said he didn't know.
So, sir, when doctors disagree,
Who's to decide it—you or me ? "

Eighteenth Century Rhyme

Jane Warmly Disapproves

What dreadful Hot weather we have!—It keeps one in a continual state of Inelegance.

JANE AUSTEN, *in a letter to Cassandra Austen*, 1796

Long Summer

Gold as an infant's humming dream,
Stamped with its timeless, tropic blush,
The steady sun stands in the air
And burns like Moses' holy bush.

And burns while nothing it consumes ;
The smoking branch but greener grows,
The crackling briar, from budded lips,
A floating stream of blossom blows.

A daze of hours, a blaze of noons,
Licks my cold shadow from the ground ;
A flaming trident rears each dawn
To stir the blood of earth around.

Unsinged beneath the furnace sky,
The frenzied beetle runs reborn,
The ant his antic mountain moves,
The rampant ram rewinds his horn.

I see the crazy bees drop fat
From tulips ten times gorged and dry,
I see the sated swallow plunge
To drink the dazzled waterfly.

A halo flares around my head,
A sunflower flares around the sun,
While down the summer's seamless haze
Such feasts of milk and honey run,

That lying with my orchid love,
Whose kiss no frost of age can sever,
I cannot doubt the cold is dead,
The gold earth turned to good for ever.

LAURIE LEE

PREFECT OF DISCIPLINE

It would be hard for Father Costello to say in words of suitable modesty why he disliked his duties

by JOSEPH W. CARROLL

FATHER COSTELLO looked discontentedly out of the window of his small room on the third floor of the five-story, grey-brick academy building. The room was his office as well as his living quarter, and sparsely furnished as became a priest with a vow of poverty. A scarred old desk with a corrugated roll top was all that made the narrow cubicle an office. For living purposes, it had an iron bed, a wardrobe, a built-in washstand, two chairs, bookshelves and a prie-dieu.

The priest's discontent was not serious enough to be a matter of conscience. Scrupulosity, that subtlest of tortures, never bedevilled Father Costello. He was a goodhearted man, gentle in all his judgments, even of himself.

But the gentleness was beleaguered, both by the memory of recent events in this room and by the view from his window. " Surely," he said, looking down into the wide street, " the ugliest section in all this great, ugly city."

It was a business street of cluttered store fronts and tacky loft buildings. Father Costello did not much care for business, even when it had a comelier mien than the graceless, hand-to-mouth enterprise of the street on which the academy was built. He was grateful that the Order had members who liked conducting its practical affairs, leaving others free for sanctity and scholarship.

" Sanctity and scholarship, my foot ! " said Father Costello, reminded suddenly of the occasion of his discontent by a figure in the street below. It was old Brother Morrissey, the church sacristan, in his best street attire : the skimpily cut pants showing unstylish ankles above the laborious polish of the old-fashioned shoes ; the black clerical fedora set with severe avoidance of any frivolous tilt. The brother had come out of a side door of the church, which stood next to the academy. He walked with stiff agility past the front steps of the church, past the brothers' dormitory building beyond it, and across the intersection at the corner into a shop on the other side of the street.

Father Costello turned away from the window. How unjust it

was, he thought, that the sight of Brother Morrissey should have provoked his cynical and mildly profane exclamation about sanctity and scholarship. For the brother in his own person embodied the first quality—and at least he did no violence to the second.

Father Costello chided himself for yielding to this mood of dissatisfaction which had seized him as soon as his working day had ended a few minutes past. The mood held the risk of self-righteousness and uncharity towards others. " I am rebuked," he argued, " by the lively ghost of the saint and scholar for whom this school is named."

The academy was named for a sixteenth-century Spaniard of noble parentage, who had abandoned a promising career as a soldier and founded a religious order dedicated to the education of the young. In his name, both the parish and the academy had been built here years before. But it was old-time's sake that kept them going nowadays. The neighbourhood had become a slum. The old-timers had long since moved away. But they still sent their sons to the academy. And they themselves still came back on Sundays to hear High Mass in the splendid old church, with its twin spires towering to the burnished crosses. The church had been hallowed by the years to the dignity of a shrine. The academy, by the same hallowing, stood as a monument to the reverence for learning, which the old-timers and their priests brought with them in their flight from an island nation in the rainy Atlantic.

" But God forgive me for a snob," mused Father Costello, " is there a true scholar on the whole faculty—save possibly young Mr. Wagner ? " He did not consciously press his own claims to scholarship. But there had been a book on the elegiac poets, written soon after his ordination years ago. It had been respectfully reviewed in the thick-paged periodicals interested in such things.

Discontent rose, livelier than ever, to the bait of this sudden memory, bobbing on a cord of ambition, invisible as fine silk and quite as strong. No doubt of it : he was poorly fitted for his present duties. Perhaps he should discuss it with his superior.

Yet it would be hard to say in words of suitable modesty why he disliked being Prefect of Discipline. Of all his qualities, he guessed, a wayward inclination to laughter at odd times made him an incompetent judge of the peccadilloes of schoolboys. He hoped it was that, more than a priggish yearning for the aloof and self-sufficient rewards of scholarship.

Through the open transom over his door, Father Costello heard Mr. Wagner's voice, synchronized with his knock. " May I come in, Father ? "

" Oh, do," said Father Costello cordially.

The scholastic entered and sat down on the kneeling bench of the prie-dieu, hitching his cassock around his knees. It was the kind of thing he did without self-consciousness or fear of criticism. Father Costello liked it in him.

It was interesting that they liked each other, these two. The kinship could not be guessed from their surfaces. Mr. Wagner was an ample young man, who stayed on the pleasant side of corpulence by playing handball every day. He had wild yellow hair, parted in the middle. He smiled most of the time, not merely to show good temper, though he was good-tempered ; and not fatuously. It was the smile of a dedicated, comic spirit.

Father Costello, many years older, was lean as a dandy's walking-stick and as elegantly straight. The pallor of his face went well with the intelligence of his eyes and the refinement of his features. He was supposed to resemble Woodrow Wilson, a likeness he did not exploit, for Father Costello was not vain of his appearance and did not really care whom he resembled, if anyone. His grey hair was wispy on top and often, as now, wanted cutting towards the neck. The rough black cloth of his cassock was worn at the elbows and seat to an iridescence, like meat when it is turning bad. A big wooden crucifix with a silvered Christus was sheathed in the cord around his middle. He habitually held his right hand on the top of it, as though he were a classic actor clutching a dagger.

" Any more boys due ? " Mr. Wagner asked.

" No, indeed," said Father Costello gratefully. " The last two of them left a while since—in haloes of utterly insincere repentance."

" Big day ? " said Mr. Wagner.

" A full blotter," said Father Costello. " A term used in the police courts, I believe. Most apt, John, most apt for my duties. Not that I wish to complain."

" Oh, complain a little," said Mr. Wagner. " I've been correcting English essays. And I'd like to hear what other kinds of crimes the boys commit."

Father Costello lifted his biretta from the top of the prie-dieu, twirled it by its pompon as he sat on the window sill. The austere little room was shadowy, the gradual darkness of a spring evening falling outside.

" Any difficult cases ? " Mr. Wagner asked.

" Nothing that would tax Suarez, John, or call for reference to the Summa Theologiae. Our Order's reputation for subtlety would suffer, I think, if it were known what kind of disciplinary cases come up in this school."

"Tell me," said Mr. Wagner. He enjoyed Father Costello's stately habit of speech, even though it had no quick salve for curiosity.

" There were five of them this afternoon," the priest said. " Let

us take them in the inverse order of interest and significance. The first was a first-year boy. He was overheard using an evil or at least dubious expression by Father Mulcahy—who sent him to me, enjoined to repeat the whole conversation in which it was used.

" The youngster's name is Higgins—a hulk with a bold eye. Quite respectful, outwardly, don't you know, but a suspicion of the malapert. It is this, I think, which irritates Father Mulcahy, who does rather stand on his dignity. This is the fifth time Higgins has been sent to me by Father Mulcahy. The actual charge in each case was—I thought—trivial."

" What did Higgins say ? " Mr. Wagner asked. But Father Costello was not to be hurried into a premature climax, least of all by an English teacher.

" It was after the 9-30 history period," said Father Costello, in the manner of a conscientious witness dictating a deposition, " which Father Mulcahy teaches and in which Higgins is a less than diligent pupil. The boys were in the corridor outside the classroom waiting for the bell to ring for the next period. Father Mulcahy, by the by, misses little that goes on in the corridors, judging by the nature of the complaints he lodges here.

" The shabby little incident was this. A classmate of Higgins—I forget his name—was claiming to have made (isn't that the right verb ?) ten shots in a row from the centre of the basketball floor in the gymnasium yesterday afternoon. This feat was accomplished while no one was present to witness it. Father Mulcahy heard Higgins use this objectionable word very loudly. He then ordered Higgins to report to me after class."

Mr. Wagner listened in ecstatic expectation. This had possibilities for one with Father Costello's gift of indirection.

" The word," said Father Costello, " is a five-letter plural which I have always thought innocuous : the name of a child's toy—the object used in many games. It was easy to guess that Higgins intended to convey—ah—dubiety by the word. He himself made this plain when he told me that his classmate always seems to accomplish remarkable athletic deeds when no one is about. In Higgins' opinion, this boy is incapable of making one shot, even if he were lifted up to the hoop. That was Higgins' illustration," said Father Costello apologetically. He was afraid Mr. Wagner would think him adept at this jargon.

" Father Mulcahy," the priest said, " was not concerned about the discourtesy of doubting a comrade's word. He appeared to know that the expression is in itself an indecent one. He insisted that Higgins explain his use of the word to me—as part of his punishment.

" Higgins is not greatly articulate in the best of circumstances,

John. But he muttered it out. You see," said Father Costello naively, " at this point, quite apart from any culpability of the boy or the placating of Father Mulcahy, I was determined to know myself. So awkward for a man in my position not to know these things.

" The word," said Father Costello delicately, " as boys use it, apparently refers—ah—to a private part of the body."

" I know," said Mr. Wagner soberly. He was forever charmed by the lacunæ in Father Costello's worldly knowledge. They accounted for his considerable popularity as a confessor. " What did you tell Higgins ? "

" I told him that in the first place it is wretched manners to doubt another's word—or to express the doubt. But if he must do it, to use some acceptable term, as ' pshaw ' or the expressive Scots ' hoots ! ' I did think of telling him simply to lift his eyebrows, but he has the pale pink kind that don't show. He said, ' Yes Father.' And I let him go, suggesting that he apologize to Father Mulcahy for using an—ah—improper word in his presence."

" A Daniel come to judgment," said Mr. Wagner.

" I do think, though," said Father Costello, " that Father Mulcahy would save us both a deal of trouble and embarrassment if he would not—eavesdrop."

" Will you tell him so ? "

" Well, no. He already regards me as a laxist. But I should like to ask him how he happens to be familiar with the word as Higgins used it."

" Next case," said Mr. Wagner.

Father Costello walked to the big desk ; from a pigeonhole he plucked a thin volume bound in blue-grey cloth. " This too," he said, " involves an implication of—ah—lasciviousness."

" Lawks ! " said Mr. Wagner. " Gomorrah was a quiet suburb with blue laws and a Sunday curfew, compared with this school."

Father Costello went on : " Father Scotus is the complainant. He often is. But the case has some interest as a moral question in which intellect and æsthetic emotion both come into play. Far worthier of the reputed—ah—casuistry of the Order than the expletives of the coarse-grained Higgins."

" Oh, boy ! " said Mr. Wagner, with simple pleasure. He knew Father Scotus well.

" It is concerned," said Father Costello, " with poetry. Or verse, to use the Aristotelian distinction."

" Either way," said Mr. Wagner, who was not a finicking man.

" Father Scotus, as you know, teaches the mechanics of versification to the third-year boys. He seems to be in a continual embroil-

ment with them. I sometimes wonder if he is perhaps not the best man for that particular assignment.

" The youth he sent up here seemed to me to be one of our better young men. I'm afraid you'll think me harsh, but their faces often appear to me to be—ah—lacklustre when matters of intellect are discussed."

" You're telling me," said Mr. Wagner. " Faces like ham fat, the ones in my English classes have."

" As you say," said Father Costello. " This child—I fancy he's about sixteen—has a very bright face. And his conversation I found most engaging. Excellent vocabulary.

" Father Scotus found him shortly before the one o'clock period —that's the versification class—with this book open at this poem."

He took a marker from the book and put on his pince-nez. " The book is by one of the modern poets: a young woman, Edna St. Vincent Millay. Her work is not familiar to me. A strenuous life she appears to lead, if the verses can be taken literally. Father Scotus holds that the whole book and the particular poem young Toomey (that's his name) was reading are marked by—ah—lubricity. This quatrain he underscored for me when he sent Toomey up here."

Father Costello read in a noncommittal tone :

Since that which Helen did and ended Troy
Is more than I can do though I be warm,
Have up your buried girls, egregious boy,
And stand with them against the unburied storm."

" What do you think ? " he asked, resting the book on his knee.

" There's no mistaking the meaning," Mr. Wagner said. " And yet I'm rather surprised Father Scotus should have got it."

" Toomey says," Father Costello explained, " that Father Scotus has something of an—ah—obsession about such things in poetry. Toomey was a little derisive about the whole affair, I thought. He told me that Father Scotus has warned the class against the moral character of almost every poet in the anthology they use. The boy was most correct and courteous. But he pointed out—and I think he enjoyed pointing out—that the anthology was compiled and annotated by our reverend principal, Father Quinlan."

" I rather enjoy it myself," said Mr. Wagner.

" Toomey told me that Father Scotus told the class that only three poets are safe to read—John Bannister Tabb, Abram Ryan . . ."

" They were both priests," said Mr. Wagner.

" I know," said Father Costello.

" Who was the third—Francis Thompson ? "

" Mercy, no. He came in for special censure. The third was Joyce Kilmer."

" But what's the matter with poor Thompson ? " said Mr. Wagner. " I should have thought ' The Hound of Heaven ' . . ."

" Toomey says," said Father Costello, aware that he was using the boy's name as though citing an authority, " that Father Scotus finds the imagery in the famous ode inordinately sensuous, in spite of the religious experience described. He takes severe exception to the line, ' Naked I wait Thy Love's uplifted stroke ! ' "

" Why, in God's name ? " asked Mr. Wagner, without blasphemy.

" Presumably," said Father Costello, " Father Scotus thinks it would have been more modest for Francis Thompson to wait for the Deity with something on—at least a . . ."

" A jock strap ? " said Mr. Wagner.

" A breechclout, I should have said," said Father Costello. He was not quite sure of Mr. Wagner's term. He was not familiar enough with the locker room and the gymnasium to know whether it was an impropriety, or one of those necessary and unpleasant terms like some in physiology and anatomy. Still, he trusted Mr. Wagner's circumspection. If he used it, it must be all right ; though possibly not with Fathers Scotus and Mulcahy.

" A sockdolager," said Mr. Wagner.

" I beg your pardon ? "

" Obsolete slang expression," Mr. Wagner explained. " I only mean it's a very interesting case. How did you settle it ? "

" I don't know that I did settle it," Father Costello said unhappily. " I questioned Toomey as to what reaction he had to the sonnet. He said he thought it was beautiful. Rather truculent he was at this point. Inclined to make an issue of freedom of the press. I doubt that the verses excited his—ah—concupiscence. He is very young.

" I advised him not to read poetry when Father Scotus is about—except, of course, Father Tabb or Father Ryan or Mr. Kilmer."

" What did he say ? "

" Nothing but the usual ' Yes, Father.' But bitterly. I fear he thought me something of a trimmer."

" O upright judge," said Mr. Wagner. " What will you tell Father Scotus ? "

Father Costello picked up his biretta from the window sill, and put it on his head, as though to make his words more official :

" That one mustn't be too literal about poetry. That the book is not on the Index—and we mustn't be holier than the Church,

must we ? He teaches Latin, too, you know. I wonder what he makes of Catullus ? "

" Next case," said Mr. Wagner.

Father Costello put the impassioned book back in one pigeon-hole and from another he brought forth a sheet of lined exercise paper. " There's an exhibit in this one too," he said, holding the paper aloft. " *Prima facie*, there is no case. But it was interesting."

" Tell me," said Mr. Wagner warmly.

" This also was a complaint of Father Scotus. And really, John, I do think the poor man must be greatly troubled in spirit to quarrel with these boys so. Do you think he is well ? "

" It depends on your standards of health," said Mr. Wagner. " I think he would not like to have his particular illness named. I feel rather sorry for the old boy—though I'm just as scared of him as the kids are. I'm sure he regards me as one of those Boccaccio-type religious and doubts that I have a vocation. But come on, let's hear it."

Father Costello studied the scrap of exercise paper. " The only crime I can see is vile Latinity, which is surely out of my present jurisdiction. I'm supposed to bullyrag them for their conduct, not their scholarship.

"The boy's name is Kerwin. A friend of Toomey's, but more of a merry-andrew. They were very thick in the corridor while waiting, and Toomey seemed to find Kerwin entertaining.

" I found him so too," said Father Costello. " Father Scotus evidently did not. He—Father Scotus—confiscated this bit of writing from Kerwin's desk during Latin class—Virgil. Kerwin admitted writing it, but said he did it ' in his own time.' The curious phrase is his."

Father Costello handed Mr. Wagner the paper. The scholastic read aloud in a puzzled voice :

Taberna est in oppido
Ubi ille sedet quem amo
Et bibit vinum eius laetissime
Et nunquam commemorat me.
Vale, vale, necesse est ire
Non oportet te flere . . .

Mr. Wagner looked up. " What gibberish is this ? "

Father Costello smiled, as though with an agreeable memory. " Kerwin sang it for me. Very pleasant voice he has, though not quite finished changing. It's a translation. The Latin is, as you well note, ridiculous. The idioms are false and the grammar questionable. And yet, you know, it has charm—like dialect English."

Mr. Wagner construed in gingerly, pony-style language: "An inn is in the walled town . . . where that very one sits whom I love . . . and drinks his own wine (who else's?) most joyously . . . and never recalls me. Good-bye, good-bye. It is necessary for me to be gone, nor is it opportune or fitting for you to weep . . ."

The scholastic paused. "A song you say?"

"Quite an old one," said Father Costello. "It seems to be having a new vogue. Kerwin says some radio comedian who specializes in reviving old ballads . . ."

Mr. Wagner shouted. "O my paradigms!" he said. "My withering declensions!" And he sang in a gusty baritone:

There is a tavern in the town, in the town
And there my true love sits him down, sits him down
And drinks his wine 'mid laughter free
And never never thinks of me.
Fare thee well, for I must leave thee
Do not let this parting grieve thee . . .

Father Costello said: "Kerwin sings it better. It calls for a plaintive tenor. A rakish type, Kerwin. He wears one of those pullovers, you know, with outlandish colours in zigzag lines. Suits the song better, somehow, than a cassock." Mr. Wagner was not offended, though he liked to sing and had a good carrying voice. After all, it was Kerwin's song. "So you dismissed the charge, Father?" said the scholastic.

"Yes," the priest said. "The boy wrote it for his own amusement. I think it's interesting that he should be amused even by bad Latin verse. And the rhyming is rather good." He hummed a little.

"What did you tell Kerwin?"

"That different people are amused by different things, and some people, God help them, are never amused at all. Kerwin said, 'Yes, Father,' the way they all do, winked and left. I overheard him telling Toomey that I said the verses showed an exquisite sense of rhythm. A tarradiddle. I said nothing of the sort."

"What will you tell Father Scotus?" asked Mr. Wagner.

Father Costello sighed. "I wish I could think of something useful to tell him, John. If I suggest that he intensify his instruction in idiomatic Latin, he'll do it—and I shall have more cases from him than ever. I might tell him to be less ready to see malice where none is intended."

"I cannot find it," said Mr. Wagner, "'Tis not in the bond."

"The next case," said Father Costello, robbing Mr. Wagner of the chance to repeat his whimsy, for he was a little tired of it, "is the only sad one of the day. The saddest of my many months in this wearisome post."

Mr. Wagner responded quickly to a seriousness, an actual sorrow in the priest's voice. He was very fond of Father Costello. " Oh ? " said Mr. Wagner. " A bad one, eh ? "

" Shabby," Father Costello said. " Painful and sickening. Two offenders for the same offence. First-year boys : cherubs to look at them. Still in knee-pants. Brother Morrissey sent them to me."

Mr. Wagner was surprised. " The church sacristan ? I've never known him to turn a boy in before. He's been known to smack them one behind if he ran into any mischief. But it's all out of character for him to report anything."

Father Costello nodded. " This is the one sin, I should think, which Brother Morrissey regards as—ah—crying to academy authority for vengeance. He was very angry."

" Anger's out of character too," said Mr. Wagner.

" Not in this instance, I think you'll find. He's close to eighty, you know. They try to argue him into retirement to the brothers' home every year, but he puts them off. Quite right, too : he does his job better than anyone around here—and he'd hate frowsting all day over devotional works. Not a contemplative, Brother Morrissey."

Well Mr. Wagner knew. " He beat me at handball the other day," he said. " Cheats like anything in the scoring, but I expect he reckons it like a golf handicap, because of his age."

Father Costello continued : " He came in here this noon hour to tell me about the two lads, Fahey and Burke. I sent a note down to the classroom that they were to report to me after hours." He paused, remembering the tremulous indignation of the sacristan, an agile sliver of a man, whose pink scalp showed clean as a baby's through the neat strands of white hair. He recalled the glimpse he had caught of the brother from the window, and his probable errand in the shop on the corner.

Father Costello said : " Brother Morrissey's room in the brothers' dormitory fronts on the cross street down the block. He was looking out of his window yesterday afternoon. He usually does at that time of day, he tells me, while he says a Rosary. He wanted to make it plain that he engages in no espionage on academy boys. It's pleasanter to say his prayers while looking out of the window : that's such an active street, always something doing.

" Brother Morrissey's been here for years, you know. Goes all the way back to the old times. He knows everyone in the neighbourhood even now. Not just parishioners, but everyone. There aren't many actual parishioners nowadays, anyway. The people who go to Mass and confession at the church are mainly railroadmen from the yards yonder, some of the business people on their way down town, and, of course, some of the old parishioners who come back.

"But Brother Morrissey knows them all, churchgoers or not. Some very special friends of his live right opposite the brothers' building. They own a little candy and tobacco store . . ."

"The Rubins?" said Mr. Wagner. "I know them too. Mr. Rubin's a Spinozist. I buy cigarettes there and we argue about it. Mrs. Rubin thinks I'm some sort of Protestant because I'm called Mister instead of Father."

"Brother Morrissey likes them very much," said Father Costello. "He says they give clothes and things to the St. Vincent de Paul Society. I doubt that he discusses philosophy with them—though he did give them a year's subscription to *The Messenger of the Sacred Heart* for Christmas."

"For Hanukkah, Mrs. Rubin told me," said Mr. Wagner. "She showed me a copy and said she thought the pictures were very pretty."

"Brother Morrissey," Father Costello said, "looked out of his window yesterday and saw the two academy boys standing in front of the store. There's a streetcar stop there, so he thought little of it, though the boys were looking up and down the street in a secretive way. But after a while the street was empty. The boys began writing on the Rubins' store window. Some kind of soap they had.

"Brother Morrissey saw Mr. Rubin come out of the store and collar the boys. The brother went out and crossed the street. One boy had written an—ah—exhortation to passers-by not to patronize the store. The other had written one word: an ugly, dirty, insulting word."

Father Costello's face was sadder than Mr. Wagner had ever seen it. "Brother Morrissey took the boys' names," the priest said. "Mr. Rubin said to let it go: they were children only, and didn't know any better. But he thought they should clean the window. Brother Morrissey saw to it that they did."

Father Costello turned to the window. The street lights had just come on, and the front window of the shop at the corner was a patch of yellow in the spring mist. "The brother was still angry when he told me about it today," said the priest. "He said he had never tattled on an academy boy before, but this was the limit. He said we were all shamed in the eyes of the kindest of neighbours. He said he would leave it to my judgment about what to do. But I don't think he really expects anything."

Mr. Wagner waited to hear the judgment.

"They are stupid boys," said Father Costello. "They were afraid of me, but not because of what they had done—only because they think it a terrifying thing to be sent to the Prefect of Discipline.

"I spoke to them about charity—the theological kind, not the almsgiving. I asked them where they got such ideas as they wrote

on the window. Fahey said his mother told him you could never trust 'those people.' Burke said he always understood 'those people' were against religion. They both spoke in substantives, apparently thinking I would be offended by the proper name of the proud people of an ancient faith."

His voice became scornful. "They said 'Yes, Father,' and 'No, Father,' at what they took to be the right places. And I gave them a routine punishment."

The priest looked at Mr. Wagner with real embarrassment. "It was a failure, John, a grievous failure. They didn't understand a word I said. I had thought the academy might send Mr. Rubin an apology. But one insult is enough, more than enough. You see, the letter would be signed by Father Quinlan, since he is the principal."

"Why not?" said Mr. Wagner.

Father Costello said softly: "I heard Father Quinlan only last week use the same word that Burke wrote on Mr. Rubin's window."

Mr. Wagner rose from the kneeler at the prie-dieu. A bell was ringing in the corridor, which meant it was time to go to the refectory for the evening meal.

"What will you tell Brother Morrissey?" asked Mr. Wagner, moving towards the door.

Father Costello sat motionless on the window sill. "To pray for us, John, all of us. For the ignorant children and those who teach them. I shall ask him to pray for those among us who are second-rate and presumptuous and purblind. Brother Morrissey is an old man of wonderful innocence. But he will understand."

Mr. Wagner had opened the door, and asked from the threshold: "Are you coming to the refectory?"

Father Costello leaned his head against the window pane, his eyes searching the lights and shadows in the street. "John," he said, "this is a wearing post, and I doubt if I'm the man for it. Do you think I should ask for a change?"

"I shouldn't," Mr. Wagner said, closing the door.

* * *

NEAR MISS

The parliamentary candidate had thundered through an impassioned address. "And," he shouted, "if a lie has passed my lips may a thunderbolt from the skies fall on my head!"

As he spoke, the fragile platform collapsed in a cloud of dust, and the orator disappeared from view. The audience sat spellbound. After a few tense moments the speaker slowly emerged from the wreckage.

"Gosh!" exclaimed a voice. "It's missed him."

THE WRITING ON THE WALL

It was a strange affair—a woman, a man, and two coal black stallions

by STUART CLOETE

DIRK LE ROUX could not understand his wife's feelings about the horses. Her scenes only confirmed his opinion that females of all kinds were unreliable and the cause of trouble. Mares were the same, affectionate one moment and lashing out the next. Except with their young, there was no counting on the behaviour of any female thing. And leaving Melvina, whom he loved but did not understand, he often went, after an argument with her, to the black stallions that he loved and did understand.

They would look at him in the half light of the stable with large dark eyes—eyes that could flash fire when they were excited, and he would stroke their soft grey muzzles with the back of his hand. Their muzzles were like mole-skin, and out of them grew a few short prickly hairs. They always made him think of the black hairs that had grown out of the spots in his aunt Louisa's face that had pricked him when he kissed her as a child. When he petted his stallions, touching their noses and slapping their hard necks and quarters they would stamp their feet, whicker at him, rising off the ground in little pleasure plunges, and blow at him with wide nostrils.

Like children those two horses were to him, like beautiful shining children, his joy, his pride and part of his life. Why, they were even a part of Melvina's life, because he had bought them to court her with, to make an impression on her father, who, being a great horseman himself, favoured his suit. He had named the horses after two Zulu kings. Chaka and Dingaan they were called. Full brothers, Chaka the elder by one year and five months.

He thought back to when he had seen Chaka the first time. A long legged, rusty coloured colt standing beside his dam in a small camp. She was a half-bred bay hackney and he had thought, "that foal will be a black and should turn out well. His father was a black." Then a year later another colt had been born—also rusty black by the same horse, but by this time Chaka, the first one, had taken on his permanent colour and in the whole district there was no finer looking yearling or one with better bone or action. Already you could see traces of his mother's hackney blood, but he had a long stride, and did not waste his time picking up his

feet and putting them down in the same place. Dirk remembered thinking then that if that second colt turned out like the first what a pair of cart horses they would make ! In his mind he had seen them as they were now. Two full brothers coal black, with white chrome leather harness, inspanned to a black Cape cart with scarlet wheels and pole.

He had thought of driving Melvina behind them, in that cart with the bright red wheels. A golden filly of a girl. Long legged, long maned, who at fifteen was already very much aware of her attractions. Almost without knowing he was doing it, he had courted the girl and the stallions together, giving them sweets and titbits and giving the girl a ribbon he had bought in town, or a coral necklace. He had talked for hours with the owner of the horses and the father of the girl. It was soon understood that he had first call on the horses if their owner, Jan Otto, ever sold them. He said he might decide to keep them himself, but in the end he had come round. And old van der Merwe was well aware of what was in his mind about his girl Melvina. What was in his mind, was what was in the mind of every young man who saw her, and was something Melvina took good care, in the most natural manner in the world, to put there.

"*Ja*," he thought as he watched Piet putting the horses into the cart, " I courted the three of them together and it is a strange thing that she cannot see that my love for her is all mixed up in my heart with my love for them."

Since his work took him driving every day—he was a dealer in livestock, cattle, horses and mules—he had felt that he might as well drive animals that were worth looking at as others that were not. He knew when they saw him coming people said, " Look, here comes Dirk le Roux with his pair of stallions," and that when he had passed anyone, and he could pass any other horses on the road, people said, " There is no shame in being passed by le Roux's black horses, they are the best in the district."

A car, Melvina said. A machine that spat smoke, that bit you with electricity if you touched it, that did not know your hand from another's. And who would he talk to on the lonely road in a motor car ? With the horses he kept up a continual conversation. Encouraging them, telling them to go faster, to go slower, to take care ; explaining such things as blowing newspapers that might frighten them, and even upon occasion discussing with them the political news, or the price he was willing to pay for a certain animal. He had worked out a kind of system—an oracle as it were, with his horses, and read their replies to his questions in the movements of their ears. If they laid them back it was *no*, if they cocked them forward it was *yes*.

With his horses and his wife and child Dirk was happy. As happy as Melvina would let him be, that is. He liked his business because it entailed much visiting of farms and talking. He liked visiting and talking and, since people always treat the man who comes to buy stock well, hoping to influence him by their hospitality, he got much good food and many a glass of brandy, or Boer wine.

Graskop, the farm that his ancestors had made in the valley in the old days, had once been a big place, four thousand *morgen*—more than eight thousand acres—but now the village, it was almost a town, had swallowed most of it, and all that was left to him, the eighth owner, was the old house which was in a bad state of repair, a hundred acres of pasture, an orchard, a small vineyard, and the oak wood where he ran his pigs. The glory of *Graskop* was gone but the old house was mellow and the trees and shrubs—the figs, camphors, bottle brush, mulberries, oranges, and lemons—were big and strong. Generations of children had played under them, generations of young people had courted among them. He loved his land, what was left of it. It was his and he was a part of the land, for the bone and blood and sinew of Dirk le Roux, and his father's before him, had been nourished by the rich soil of *Graskop*, by the fruits and vegetables and meats of that soil.

Life, he thought, if it was not for those little troubles with his wife about the horses, was good. There was enough left of the farm to give them plenty of produce; and the great stable, yards, sheds and *kraals* that had once housed the beasts and slaves of his ancestors now served to hold the animals he traded in and so he was content, and in his way happy.

Soon the stallions would come. Melvina le Roux looked at the white wall of the stable that ran at right-angles to the house. The stable was on the other side of the wall, but the cart house was on this side and every morning Piet, the coloured man, brought the horses round down the short drive that was bounded by the white wall of the back of the stable on one side and a line of oak trees on the other. In the summer the wall was dappled with the black shade of the oaks, half hidden by them, but now they were bare. Great grey bones, lichened with orange on the south where the sun never touched them, apparently dead, but with life in them, with leaves and acorns and new little branches all latent in the massive bulk of their trunks.

The oaks were like Dirk her husband—immovable, strong. They had been planted by his ancestors, and each generation of le Rouxs growing up in their shadow, appeared to have been affected by them, so that people said of the family, "Ah, the le Rouxs of *Graskop* are like oaks, strong and obstinate. *Ja*," they

said, " you can make things out of an oak, but you will spoil many tools in the making."

She felt she was not of the metal to change her husband. She was too soft. But she was sometimes comforted by the thought of what water continually dripping on a rock could do. Nothing could be harder than rock. Nothing softer than a drop of water. Yet in time the water had its way.

Melvina had her child on her knee. Little Lena, blonde like herself, and like her with the dark eyes that showed the Huguenot strain of their blood.

Lena was five and she wanted to see the horses come. She loved them. They were beautiful with their flowing manes and long black tails. She loved to hear them neigh and see them cock their ears when they came near to her father. She loved to stand between her father's knees when he drove them. She loved the smell of the horse sweat, and the white leather harness, and the sound of the wheels spinning on the hard road. She watched eagerly for them to come round the corner with Piet between them, leaning back, holding them as they came down the drive, tossing their heads, pulling at him, almost lifting him off his feet in their excitement. Her father liked them in high condition. He liked them to show their strength and their pride.

Mevrou van der Merwe also watched the corner. She was Melvina's mother and lived with her now that she was widowed. She watched uneasily because there was something going on here. Something between her daughter, the two horses, and Dirk, her son-in-law. A strange affair between a woman, a man and two coal black stallions. The eyes of the three were on the window. Of the old woman, who as a woman was finished and knew it, of the child who had not yet begun to be a woman and knew nothing of it, and of Melvina, the young woman, in fullness of her womanhood . . . a tall, well made woman with fine breasts, a small waist, good hips and strong slim legs—legs like a buck her husband said she had. For the rest of her, he tended to quote *The Song of Songs*, and not only in private when they were alone, which embarrassed her—but Dirk was a man who loved the beauties of the body of a woman, or a horse. Sometimes it seemed to her that he thought of them together, and spoke of them in the same breath. Sometimes when she watched his face as he caressed his stallions she thought of his hands on her in the darkness of the night, and wondered if he had the same expression on his face. If his eyes were as bright, his mouth as tender. A bold brave man, a hard worker, a great lover of all things that lived, a lover even of the game he hunted, for like all Boers he loved to hunt. He loved loving, he loved eating and drinking, he loved smoking the strong tobacco

that he bought from a friend up in the Transvaal. He was in addition a very handsome man, tall, strong, florid with black hair and a fine beard.

At *Graskop* he was the centre of all things, the master, the *groot Baas*. And for all her beauty and all her tricks, and she had many loving tricks of wheedling and cajoling, of promising with her eyes and lips, she had never been able to master him, the way, in her opinion, a beautiful woman should be able to master a man. Dirk could not be seduced either before marriage or after it, and the cause was his love of his horses. Never had a woman been more plagued than she, never had a woman more cause for jealousy, or rivals about whom she could do so little. If he quoted the Bible about her charms, he did so too about his stallions—quoting, for instance from Job, the part where the war horse said *Ha—Ha* when he heard the shouting of the captains.

It was this, her sharing even of Biblical quotations with the horses, that enraged her more, much more, than the indecency of such quotations before friends. That her teeth were like pomegranate seeds and the rest she knew—but that he should then jump from Solomon to Job and the war horses, was more than she could bear. If only it was a woman, she thought. No woman had more to offer than she, no woman could do more for a man, give him greater joy. But no woman could carry a big man at a gallop over the *veld*, or snort and stamp, when her husband came near her.

Irritation flooded her. She moved the child on her knee. As she moved her, the child cried out, " There they are. There are the horses," and her eyes were forced to look. She had meant to go away. Today she had said to herself, " I will not look. I will go to the back of the house. I will not torture myself any more." It was absurd, this daily routine they went through just because Lena loved to watch for the horses. Let her watch them by herself. Let her watch with her grandmother. Perish the two damned black horses. Black was the colour of evil. The horses were wicked. They had stolen her husband from her. But still, she could not keep from looking.

There they came, tossing their manes, whisking their tails, walking as if they stepped on hot bricks, their ears cocked, their nostrils flaring red. Piet lay back on the *riems* of their halters, holding them tight. He had taken the raw hide through their mouths as if they were bits, and still they jogged him up and down—almost off the red gravel of the drive. Black as night, without a white hair on them, the great horses came past, and then, as usual, just as they came level with the house, they threw up their heads, opened their mouths, rolling back their lips so that she could see their teeth, and shrilled out their trumpet call.

They were telling Dirk that they were here, that they were ready for him, that he must come to them. They shrilled again, and pawed at the ground. Their iron shoes shone like silver as they raised their feet. And then she saw her husband come, as he always came, with a slice of bread for each of them. Bread that she had baked. There was something wicked in using it, for bread was sacred. It was like giving some kind of sacrament to the devil. The black hooved stallions were the Devil himself.

She turned to her mother and said, " I wish it was a woman. *Magtig*, if it was a woman I could face her and him. I could make him choose. But what can I do with a horse ? I want him to sell them," she said, " but he won't. He says he might as well sell me. That I and the horses are his life, the very blood of his life. He does not even say the child. Just the horses and me. We are just things to him. Things to show off to others. Things to give him pleasure. I told him to sell them to the undertaker. 'They are fine horses for an undertaker,' I said, 'and Jacob Coetzee would buy them, for his horses are now old, and he prides himself on his equipage.' He just laughed, Ma, and said, ' Can you see old Jacob sitting in his top hat behind a pair of stallions like mine ? ' and I said, ' They need not be stallions,' and then he struck me. ' Castrate my stallions, woman,' he said, ' that will only happen when I am dead.' But I still wish that Meneer Coetzee had them. I wish I could see them pulling the hearse, and that Dirk would buy a nice Ford motor car that I could be proud of riding in. I wish . . ."

Her mother said, " Do not wish, Melvina. In my life I have learnt that it is dangerous to wish. Dirk is a good man and if he loves horses more than he should, it is better than his loving other women, or gambling or drinking, or coming home to beat you."

" He struck me," Melvina said.

The memory of the blow stung her anew. Telling her mother of it revived it all, so that her face flushed, as if with the heat of the slap. Her eyes watered. Angry tears formed, hung poised, and rolled down the side of her nose. Her heart beat faster with love, with hate, with anger, with jealousy. I must be all to him, she thought. All. There must be nothing else in his mind and heart. Me and Lena, my child who is a part of me, a piece that is broken off me, as much a part of me as the cutting of a mulberry tree is a part of the parent tree. Horses can have no part in this relationship.

Horses. She hated them. She found she had always hated horses, and stallions most of all. Their masculinity outraged her ; their pride, their prancings and neighings, the way they looked

about them, so bold and free. It made one hot to think of it. If he had just liked horses it would have been different, she felt. But stallions were something else, something apart and special. In spite of the fact that they had never been used at stud, the potential was there, the latent power of their great black shining loins. It lay in the strength of their backs, the power of their arched necks and flowing manes. Their presence was more than a decent woman could bear and she would end it.

At once, today, she must go to him and say " choose." She did not know what he must choose or how. She could not say she would divorce him if he did not get rid of his horses, because divorce for people like her was unthinkable. They married for better or worse, till death parted them, but in some other way he must choose. He must choose which he would love. For her love she could deny him. Not the function of it, for he had his rights, but the spiritual side of those rights, the affection and the passion that animated her whenever she saw him, whenever she even heard his voice or footstep. This she would tear out of her heart and destroy. This love she would throttle if he did not choose her. As if it was a chicken, she thought.

She would wring the neck of her love, and dead, throw it away so that it would rot, and all its beauty become putrescent. Like a dead bird, its feathers soiled and awry would fall off its body and be blown hither and thither by the wind, till they decayed and were trodden underfoot. Her memories would be like the feathers fading, becoming spoilt till finally she would find it hard to believe that there had ever been any glory or beauty there. All this she would tell Dirk if she could. It would be hard because she was a feeling and not a talking woman. A woman of the heart rather than the mind.

But the end had come now, suddenly, as she spoke to her mother. Why even when he had courted her he had spent almost as much time courting those horses. Those years when she had felt his eyes on her, running over her. His eyes and hands had been on those two black colts as well. He had gone from the one to the other. When he had not been working he had divided his time between them. Between me and the horses, she thought. What a thing to have done. And how was it, she wondered, that the full significance of it all had not been apparent to her before ?

Her mother was saying something. She said, " *Ja, ja*, yes, yes," to her mother. She could hear herself say it, but she was taking nothing in. In her mind she saw her husband in the stable yard fondling those black devils, feeding them the holy bread she had baked. Holy, because bread was the staff of life given to man by God for his sustenance. Bread was not for the beasts. Mealies

and other grains were for them. Wheat was for man and man alone, and the ground wheat, already holy, was made more so by the act of baking, by the kneading of it into dough, by the magical act of its rising. Her mother's words penetrated the fury of her mind at last. She was saying again (why had she to repeat herself so much ?) that it was a mistake to wish. Wishes often came true and then one was sorry.

" Sorry ? " she said. " No, Ma, I shall not be sorry, if my wish comes true, and these two black devils of horses are inspanned into the hearse where they belong. Sorry ! " she said much louder, almost in a scream, " Sorry, no, no, I shall be more than glad. It is something that I pray to the Almighty for every night and morning. I say, ' Lord God save me from those wicked horses and put them where they belong, one on each side of the *disselboom* of Meneer Jacob Coetzee's fine new hearse.' Let them serve the Lord dragging Christian corpses to holy soil, instead of the Devil, in their pride, as they do today. This I pray Ma, and this I hope with all my heart."

She burst into tears and her mother said, " It is the full of the moon and since you were twelve years old, the full of the moon has always affected you. As it grows large you have always been difficult, wild and strange, and as it wanes again, good as gold and gentle as a woolly lamb. I remember telling Dirk this before you married him. For I thought, ' he is a simple man knowing more of horses and cattle than of women.' So I told him," she went on.

She had dared to tell him this. Her mother had told him her secret. And it wasn't true either. It was a wicked lie, an invention.

" I said," her mother went on, " ' Melvina is difficult at that time,' and he said ' Yes, I understand. A mare or a heifer is often difficult at certain times. One must be gentle with them then, but careful to keep away from their horns and heels.' He laughed," her mother said, " and I laughed too at my fears of his ignorance of women for it came to me then, that a man who knows animals also knows women, and I was right for he has been a fine husband to you."

" He struck me," Melvina said.

" Struck ! " her mother said. " A little slap for saying a wicked thing like that. He has never beaten you and he never will. Dirk is a fine husband to you, my girl, a fine father to little Lena, and a fine son to me who never was blessed by one."

Melvina held the child close to her. Lena was whimpering, she did not like what was going on. Argument, raised voices. Her mother's tears had fallen on her face and were salt in her mouth, and besides, she wanted to run out to her father and the splendid horses. She wanted to see him drive off.

" The horses, Ma," she said, " I want to go the horses."

The child too, Melvina thought. Those devils had stolen both her husband and her child.

"I want to go to the horses," Lena said again. "I want to see them go out of the yard."

"We will both go," Melvina said. *Ja*, they would both go. And her husband must choose. He must do something. This could not go on. It was more than she could bear.

She pushed the child away from her and got up.

Her mother said, "Where are you going, Melvina?"

She said, "To see Dirk. To tell him."

"Don't go," her mother said, "you must not go when you are like this. It is the moon, I tell you. It is the moon."

The moon. Her mother would send her mad with this moon talk. And if there was anything in it, it was her mother's fault. It was her mother who had first planted the idea in her childish mind. That she was odd when the moon was full. Till at last, when looking at it she had said to herself, I am odd when you are big. And the rabbit sitting up in the full moon had seemed to agree.

"*Ja*," he had said, "we are odd, you and I. Mad as hares."

But there was nothing odd in this matter of the horses, or of having been struck, or of having to share her husband with agents of the Devil himself. If only it was a woman, she thought again . . . If only he would sell them to the undertaker. Meneer Coetzee was a fine looking man and the horses would just suit him, and they would get a car. She saw the car in her mind. A nice black Ford on high wheels, with a hood to keep the sun off them, and side curtains that you fitted on if it rained. Why, with a car they could go fifty, or a hundred, miles in a day. The world was open to them. Travel, life, everything could be theirs with a motor car.

The child ran beside her, hopping and skipping, putting her weight first on one foot and then on the other, and jumping, then trotting with high action like a hackney, tossing her golden mane of hair. Her mother caught her by the wrist and jerked her arm.

"Walk like a lady," she said. "You are not an animal."

In her mind she said, you are not a horse. In her mind she said, those black devils have bewitched my child. They have stolen my husband and bewitched my child.

She was in the yard now, in the blazing winter sunshine. Everything was white, unrelieved by the greenery of the trees, the oaks threw only the faintest blue tracery of shadow from their branches, on the white of the walls. Piet stood by the horses' heads. Dirk must have finished petting them because he stood holding on to the mud guard of the near wheel with his left hand. With his right he held the reins and the dashboard. The long, black whip,

bound every few inches with wide brass bands, shone as it stood in its socket. She noticed he had the lamps on. She saw the candles in them, saw that they were long and new, but that they had been lit, the wicks were black, so they would light again easily. That meant that he would be home late. He was going far, twenty miles perhaps, and must rest his horses. Forty miles there and back: nothing in a car, but a long drive, even for horses like the two that were bucketing about, and rubbing their strong shoulders against the scarlet pole of the cart.

"Dirk," she said, "Dirk."

He said, "*Ja*," and swung himself upwards.

He sat down, put his feet against the dashboard and tightened his hold on the reins. The horses felt him take hold, arched their necks, curved their strong quarters inwards with their hocks under them, so that the moment they got the signal, the shout from their master, "*maak los*"—make loose—that would bring Piet with a leap to the wall, they would spring forward, and the cart would move out into the drive like a bullet.

For the hundred yards of the drive they would gallop, Dirk standing and calling to them. And when they got to the entrance, where the gate used to be, they would stop and go out at a walk into the main road. But they loved their gallop. Specially did they love it on a sunshiny cold winter's day, like today, when their breath was like smoke out of the red fire of their nostrils. But today, they did not go at once. He held them in and they began to rear. But he still held them and calmed them with his voice.

"What is it?" Dirk said. "Tell me quickly for I cannot hold them long."

"You must sell them," she said. "You must sell them to the undertaker or else . . ."

"Or else what?" he shouted. This time the stallions were angry. They were standing right up, pawing the air. They lifted Piet off the ground. He could not hold them longer without the danger of an accident, a broken pole or harness. The woman was mad, sell them to the undertaker . . .

"You must sell them," she said again, "or else . . ."

"Or else what?" Now they must go. "*Maak los*," he shouted.

Piet let go and the flying red wheels only missed him by a foot.

Lena burst into tears. "It was not nice," she said. "I do not like to see him go off like that. It makes me afraid."

"Afraid, you are right to be afraid, they are devils."

When she went in again her mother was standing by the house plants in the window.

She said, "What did you do, Melvina? Why did he go off

like that ? His face was angry and the horses were angry. An angry man is not good with angry horses. For safety one or the other must be calm."

" I said he must sell them to the undertaker, to Meneer Coetzee. Sell them or else . . ."

" Or else what ? "

" I do not know Ma. *Ek weet nie*, but he must do something. And he never waited to find out." But perhaps it was just as well, she thought, for she had not known how she would go on.

" I do not like it," her mother said.

" Nor do I," Melvina said. " He must sell them. I cannot go on this way."

" Why is Lena crying ? " her mother said. " What's the matter ? "

" I am frightened," Lena said. " Pa went out too fast. The wheel nearly went over poor Piet."

" They are devils," Melvina said, and she left her child with her mother and went into the bedroom. It should have been done by now but it wasn't. Everything was as it had been when they got up. There was the mark of where she had lain in the night. And the deeper, bigger mark of where Dirk had lain beside her. In that bed her child had been conceived and born. She flung herself on to it in a passion of tears. Those *verdoem* horses would spoil everything, and ruin her life. His talk was all of them. Of how they had gone, of when they must next be shod, of how he was going to show them at the Caledon Show again next year.

When her crying was over she made the bed, and did the room. She even did the room especially well, as if she owed it something for not having done it earlier. She put a clean counterpane on the bed, one that had been a wedding present and which she seldom used. She put flowers in a vase on the table by the window, and then feeling much better went to the kitchen to see how the new batch of bread was rising under its white blanket cover.

She was looking at the dough when she heard a horse galloping up the drive. Who could it be and why the hurry ? she wondered as she put the bread back. Soon, in another hour it would go into the oven. She must wash the flour off her hands, and see that she had none on her face, before she went in to see who had come. She heard voices in the front room. He was talking to her mother. She looked in the glass that was hung behind the kitchen door. It was kept there so as to be hidden when the door was open, no woman wishing to be accused of the sin of vanity ; but no woman either was without a mirror somewhere in her kitchen, even if it was no more than the shining bottom of a copper saucepan. She tidied her hair and went into the sitting room. Her mother was in

tears. The man was Jan Smit, a young man she knew well.

"What is it?" she said.

"I do not know how to tell you," he said.

Her mother looked up and said, "I will tell her. Your husband is dead, Melvina. The horses bolted and threw him out of the cart and he fell on his head."

"*Ja*," young Smit said. "They are bringing him."

Bringing him home. He was dead. They would have to put him in the bedroom. Suppose she had not done the room. Easily she might have been caught with the room not done. How lucky she had put on the good counterpane and flowers in the vase.

"*Ja*," she said, "I am not surprised. Those horses were devils."

In her mind she said, it was him or me. That is what I would have said to him had he waited. I should have said—"or else I will leave you. You must choose. One of us must go." Now he was dead. And she would sell the horses.

"*Ja*," she said, "they are devils and I will sell them. They are not hurt?" she asked.

"I saw it all," Smit said. "Dirk was driving fast and hard. His face was red and the horses were angry, their necks were white with curds of sweat. I said to myself, 'It is not good to drive like that.' I also said, 'What has gone wrong, for Dirk le Roux is known for his gentleness with beasts?' And then a mare passed. A man was leading her. Fourie it was. She was in a certain condition and he was taking her to visit a horse. Dirk's stallions became excited, and shrilled and neighed at her, and she cocked her ears and whinnied to them. They called to each other and Dirk became angry and used his whip on them."

"They have never been whipped," Melvina's mother said. "He never did more than let the lash rest upon their backs."

"*Ja*," Smit said, "that is why they went mad. They began to gallop. Dirk stood up in the cart but could not hold them. The rein broke as he pulled at it to try to turn them, and he fell out backwards on his head, on the hard road. I saw it all," he said. "He fell and was killed. His legs twitched a little and then he was still. There was no blood. It was his neck that was broken, I think."

Only then did Melvina begin to cry. The shock had been too great. Her horror at her husband's death had for an instant been compensated for by the fact that she had been right about the horses, that if he had taken her advice and sold them it would not have happened. She had said "I told you so," to him in her mind. But he was dead. She would never say "I told you so" to him again.

Her mother said, "*Ja*, cry my girl, cry. But it's you who killed him by your jealousy of the horses that he loved."

Then her mother came to her and put her arms round her and led her to the spare bedroom that was never used.

"Lie there," she said. "I will bring you coffee and see to everything. *Ja*," she said, "I will lay my son out, for he was like a son to me. No other hand shall touch him."

"Coetzee will be here soon," Smit said.

"*Ja*," the old woman said, "like an *aasvoel* he will be here. Like a vulture in the sky circling, waiting for death, he will be here."

"*Ja*," Smit said, "but it is not only because of that he will come. He wants the horses."

In the other room Melvina heard him say that.

The horses. Well I certainly can't keep them, she thought. She lay still. She would stay, she decided, till they had brought Dirk in and had gone again. She could not face anyone yet. Later she would tidy herself and put on the black dress she had worn after her father died. Her mother would bring it to her. It was lucky that even after the birth of her child her figure had not changed. It would still fit her and she looked well in black. It showed off the mass of her yellow hair and her milk white complexion. She looked very pure when she was in black, and her eyes big, dark ringed with sorrow, would look enormous. She remembered how she had looked when her father died and what people had said.

She remembered the undertaker then, when he had come to the house. And thinking back she remembered feeling even then that he was a fine looking man. She had felt this though she was newly married to Dirk. Dirk she had loved with the passion of a young woman. But Jacob Coetzee was a man one could admire. She wondered if he would recognize the black dress and decided he would not. After all he saw nothing else, and to make certain, she would alter it. She would put on the cuffs and collar of white lace that she had once bought from a salesman, a very good looking young man, and that she had never worn. She did not even think her mother knew she had them. She had not seen the traveller and she had never mentioned his having come.

Her mother was right as usual. In the hush of evening, when the doves in the bare oaks were cooing, Meneer Coetzee came to see her. She was ready for him in her black dress, with the new lace collar and cuffs. She had just had time to dampen them, iron them, and tack them on, when her mother told her he had come.

"The *aasvoel* is here to see you," she said.

Her mother had never liked the man, he was too serious for her. Her mother, despite her years, was a light woman, Melvina

decided suddenly, she did not even respect the predicant, and it seemed to her now that she had ever been over fond of her husband, Dirk. His blatant, boastful full-blooded arrogance, his rough caresses, his loud voice and laughter, his jokes that often had a more than bedroom flavour, had all appealed to her. Dirk had made her laugh with that full belly laughter that she enjoyed. When she laughed, despite her stays, her stomach went up and down. But Meneer Coetzee never made anyone laugh. His was a serious profession. She looked in the glass—a mirror was permissible in a bedroom—straightened a corner of her lace collar, and went out to see her visitor.

Jacob Coetzee was a tall man with a white face, bushy eyebrows and a mass of greying hair. He stood, top hat in hand, the long stooped figure of a man bowed by the perpetual grief which was the perquisite of his profession.

He said, " Mevrou, I am sorry to be here."

He added, " I am sorry to be everywhere. I am not," he went on, "a welcome figure. I even know what I am called. Coetzee the *aasvoel.* It is not easy to be an undertaker," he said. " And since my wife died two years ago leaving me with three small motherless children, I have been alone."

Melvina pointed to the chair. He sat down, with his tall hat held upside down like a black bucket on his knee. It had a lining of purple silk. Somehow it surprised Melvina to see it. I never knew his hat had such a lining, she thought. Then she said:

" *Ja;* you must be a lonely man. Now I too, shall know loneliness. I am young to be widowed, and never did a woman lose a finer husband, or a child a better father." She saw suddenly what a fine man Dirk had been.

" *Ja,*" he said, " a tragic end for so fine a man. But it was not unforeseen. Those horses were bound to bring trouble."

" That is what I always said, Meneer. I was always against them. My last words to him were *you must sell those horses. You must sell them to Meneer Coetzee the undertaker* . . . Oh," she said. " Perhaps I should not have said that. It just slipped out. But before this happened you did want to buy them ? You remember," she said, " when you got your beautiful new hearse you said if only I had a pair of black horses like Dirk le Roux's. But I suppose that . . ."

Now her voice faded and she dabbed her eyes with the lace handkerchief that matched the collar and cuffs. It had been a present. The salesman had given it to her. He'd said, " I give it to you because you are so beautiful, and may you never have to use it for anything except blowing your nose."

And now here she was crying into it, a widow, the very first time she was using it. It would make the salesman sad if he knew. She crossed her legs demurely and pulled down her black skirt.

"Now," she said, "you will not want them I suppose."

"On the contrary Mevrou," Coetzee said. "Among other things that is what I came about. For the other things I will speak to your mother, but the horses are yours."

"*Ja*," she said, "they are mine."

"Your husband would wish it," he said. "He would like to drive behind them for the last time."

"*Ja*," she said. "He loved them. Sometimes I thought he loved them more than he loved me."

"I shall not give them any mealies," Coetzee said. "No grain." He acted as if they were already in his stable.

"Just *veld* hay," he said, "and my boy will lead them in the hearse."

Absentmindedly Melvina said, "*Ja, ja.*"

"Afterwards," he said.

Of course he must mean after the funeral, Melvina thought.

"Afterwards of course," he said again, "I shall cut them."

"Of course," she said absentmindedly.

"Stallions," he said, "are not suitable in a hearse."

"*Ja*," she said. "They are not suitable."

Not in a hearse, she thought, nor anywhere else for that matter. It was a pity he was so old. But he was a fine man and admired her. She knew that from the way he had looked at her legs when she had pulled her skirt down. She knew what was in his mind. No, there was no doubt about his admiration, and undertaking was a good business. He dealt in a crop that never failed. What was it Dirk had called him? *A middle man between the dead, and God and the Devil.*

That was like Dirk. It had made her mother laugh. But death was no laughing matter. I wish he was younger, she thought again. But then young men were seldom rich and she had a child to think of. Lena was about the same age as his eldest girl, Johanna. A child had to have a father. And Jacob, she called him that in her mind, was a serious man. Dirk had not been serious. It was his lack of seriousness, his joy in galloping about the countryside behind his black horses that had brought him to an early grave, left her a widow and his child fatherless.

Tears filled her eyes. Her mother had said this happened "because you wished him to sell them to the undertaker." Well in a way her mother had been right. And here was the undertaker trying to buy them from her. Her mother had said it was dangerous to wish, because a wish so often came true; that it was like a kite, with many things you did not want, tied to the tail of it.

She felt Jacob's eyes on her legs. They were on her ankles and calves; she drew her legs in and put her feet on the rail of her chair. She felt warm and uneasy. Her mother had said, "Often one does not understand what one wishes for. A woman," she said, "should not wish. She should accept and live life as it comes to her." But it certainly could do no harm to wish Jacob was younger.

Jacob Coetzee. A pretty name. Mevrou Coetzee . . . Melvina Coetzee. She looked out of the window, through the pot plants, at the white wall of the barn. In big black letters she wrote her name there, in her mind, forming the letters carefully, rounding them voluptuously and setting a splendid tail upon the Z. Melvina Coetzee, Melvina Coetzee, she wrote. Like an advertisement it looked. Very real plastered on the white wall. And then seeing it written there, she accepted it. It is my fate, she thought. It is for the child. He is a fine man and perhaps more vigorous than he looks. Looks were deceptive sometimes. Dirk for instance had not been as vigorous as he had looked.

Coetzee said, "I will pay you two hundred pounds for the pair."

She said, "They are good horses, but everyone knows that Dirk only paid a hundred pounds for them, and even then people said it was too much."

"*Ja*," he said, "that may be so, but I will pay it because I want them very much. They are what I need to complete my life's ambition. A fine hearse and a fine matched pair of blacks. Horses," he said, "that have taken prizes at a show."

But she knew that it was more than the horses he wanted. And she knew too, that it was more than the horses he would get. She moved uneasily on her chair. In a year, when the dead were assumed to be beyond jealousy, and the living thwarted of their scandal, he would come to fetch her. With her, he would get back his two hundred pounds—a ridiculous price.

Ja, he would have the money, and her, and the child, and the house, and the land and the stock. The two hundred pounds would be a fine investment for him, bringing him in a hundredfold increase, and on her part she would regain the stallions. Only of course they would be stallions no longer. In a year!

In a year Lena would be six. In a year her husband, cold in his grave, would be used to being dead, and his fine black stallions calm in their gelded state. That was what had made him angry. When he slapped her he had said, "Before God you are like all women. They are Delilahs all of them. *Only over my dead body will my horses be cut.*" Well, that was it. Only over his dead body. It was very sad, but in a year, in one more passing of each season—

a spring, a summer, an autumn and a winter again, it would all be over.

Ja, she thought, when he comes for me I will go with him willingly. In the year I shall have got used to him and the name. She knew that every time she looked at the white stable wall she would see it written up there. Melvina Coetzee . . . Melvina Coetzee. She felt her lips making the words. That new name would blot out what she had seen so often against that wall. Piet leading in the horses. Dirk petting them and feeding them. And his start from home at a gallop.

She decided that though she had known of Jacob's interest in her ever since her father's funeral, she had never really appreciated him, or understood the delicacy of his approach. For here was the unbelievable. A man proposing to a widow before her husband was buried, before he was cold almost, and in such a manner that neither could be compromised. On the contrary, everyone would say what a generous man the undertaker was to pay such a price for those dangerous horses to the young widow, and when they were married no one would be surprised. The high price, which amounted to a gift, though suitably wrapped in the packaging of commerce, would be enough to account for her liking for him.

Though of course some, jealous of her good fortune—for Coetzee was well off, the owner of two farms and other property besides his business—might say that such a pill as an undertaker had of necessity to be gilded before it could be swallowed.

Her mind went back to the present, to his offer of two hundred pounds. In this way he was bespeaking her. Taking an option on her as it were, and trusting her not to abuse his confidence. But there is nothing to hold me, she thought. I can sell him the horses and marry someone else and he can do nothing. People will just think him a fool if he complains. She was delighted that he should take such a risk in the hope of holding her. She smoothed the silk over her hips with both hands, running them down almost to her knees, then she pulled her skirt down again, and raised her lace-edged handkerchief to her eyes and dabbed at them.

"I will take two hundred pounds for the horses," she said. "I will take it because poor Dirk said that 'if a man pays a great deal for something he will take great care of it.' He said 'the more he pays the more care he will take.' He also said that if a man gets something for nothing he will not value it. *Ja*," she said, "Dirk was a fine man full of love and wisdom, and wise sayings, many of which I did not understand." That Delilah business she thought. That was something she had never really followed.

"After all, Meneer," she said, "what can I do with them? I am afraid of them."

"I will treat them well," he said. He stared into the lining of his hat. Probably the name of the maker is at the bottom of the hat, Melvina thought. She was consumed with curiosity about it. Who made it, she wondered, and where? Certainly it came from overseas. Well, she thought, one day I will know. She stared at the white wall again and saw her name, in her own flowing script. When he goes, she thought, I must find a piece of paper and pen and ink and try it. There was ink and paper on Dirk's desk. She could write it there. Melvina Coetzee . . . Melvina Coetzee. Her mind wrote it over and over again, copying it, as she had copied things when she was a child. She became eager for him to go. The course was now set. Nothing more could be done. She got up and stood looking down, smoothing her dress.

He got up and said, "Then I will take them."

"*Ja*," she said, "you can send for them."

"I will take the boy on too if he will come to me."

"Piet?" she said.

"*Ja*," he said. "He knows them. It would be better if he stayed with them for a while."

"Until . . ." she said.

"*Ja*," he said, "until."

"Yes," she said, "it would be best. Afterwards they will be tame."

"I will pay in gold," he said. "I like gold. When you have got gold in a bag you have got something."

"Yes," she said. Dirk had often been satisfied with cheques. All of them had been good, but it had seemed wrong to her. To give a man horses, or mules, or cattle and get nothing but a bit of paper back. She took Coetzee's hand.

He said, "I commiserate most heartily in your tragedy and will do what I can to ease your burden. That, Mevrou, is what an undertaker is for."

Melvina thought, *The middle man between the dead, and God and the Devil.* The things Dirk said sometimes stuck in your mind even if you did not understand them. She thought of him alone on the great double bed, lying on the best counterpane, and the flowers in the vase. How strange, she thought, that when I picked them I should have known nothing. Why, she thought, at the moment I was pulling them he was perhaps falling out of the cart on to his head.

She hardly noticed Coetzee saying goodbye. She was standing staring at the writing on the wall as he went down the drive. His

tall hat was on his head. He turned back to look at the house, and seeing her at the window raised his hat and bowed ceremoniously. He thinks I was watching him, she thought. But I wasn't. I had forgotten him. She nodded back at him and put her handkerchief to her eyes.

She looked again. There behind the undertaker came the two blacks. Piet was leading them. They stepped as proudly as ever. Their running away had done them no harm. Even the cart was undamaged, they said. If he had just let them run nothing would have happened. They knew the road so well. But he had had to try to control them. He had to control everything. He could not let things be, could not let time ripen circumstances till like a fruit it fell into the waiting lap. Jacob was not like that. Jacob could wait. But of course an undertaker has to.

The horses walked with cocked ears, they stopped together and looked back neighing with wide nostrils. This was not the time for them to be taken out. They neighed for their master. So that he should know, so that he should come to them, and pet them, and feed them tit-bits. They neighed again more shrilly, more violently—the scream of stallions. It was as if they knew they were being sold into bondage, Melvina thought. As if they knew they had been betrayed. Never before had their call been unanswered. Even that once when Dirk had been ill he had had them brought to the window each day and had talked to them, and they had made blowing noises out of their nostrils at him, and pawed at the ground in front of the house.

Death, she thought, what can they know of death? But from now on it was to be their master and only companion. Where death called they would come, and for the first time she was ashamed. How she hated those horses. First they had come between her and her husband. Then they had caused his death, and now they made her suffer shame. They were going. But she must follow them. She had seen the writing on the wall. It was a woman's duty to accept her fate, to live life as it came.

But even gelded she would hate them, for there was that in them which could not be destroyed. Whatever they became, there would remain something of what there had been. The past could not be obliterated. It remained, and perhaps her mother was right after all. Perhaps it was better not to wish, but now it was too late. The writing once written could not be erased.

* * *

One reassuring thing about modern art is that things can't be as bad as they are painted.

M. WALTHALL JACKSON

OVER THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY

I journeyed fur, I journeyed fas';
I glad I foun' de place at las'!

JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS, *Nights with Uncle Remus*

O the blackthorn and the wild cherry
And the owl in the rotting oak tree
Are part of the Cornish landscape
Which is more than can be said for me.

O the drum and the coconut fiddle
And the taste of Arabian tea
The Vimto on the verandah
And the arrack shops on the quay.

I wish I'd never heard of Kandy
Or the song in the whiteflower tree.
(There's a thousand loafing matelots
in the old base ship
An' I wish that one of them was me.)

O the pineapple salads of Colombo
The wine-bar at Trincomali
My bonny lies over the ocean :
The brilliant Arabian Sea.

CHARLES CAUSLEY

Murea

He led Bateman to a long low window.

"Look at that," he said, with a dramatic gesture. "Look well."

Below them coconut trees tumbled down steeply to the lagoon, and the lagoon in the evening light had the colour, tender and varied, of a dove's breast. On a creek, at a little distance, were the clustered huts of a native village, and towards the reef was a canoe, sharply silhouetted, in which were a couple of natives fishing. Then, beyond, you saw the vast calmness of the Pacific and twenty miles away, airy and unsubstantial like the fabric of a poet's fancy, the unimaginable beauty of the island which is called Murea. It was all so lovely that Bateman stood abashed. "I've never seen anything like it," he said at last.

Arnold Jackson stood staring in front of him, and in his eyes was a dreamy softness. His thin, thoughtful face was very grave.

Bateman, glancing at it, was once more conscious of its intense spirituality.

"Beauty," murmured Arnold Jackson. "You seldom see beauty face to face. Look at it well, Mr. Hunter, for what you see now you will never see again, since the moment is transitory, but it will be an imperishable memory in your heart. You touch eternity." W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM, *The Trembling of a Leaf*

By a Sea of Malachite

A blue-black Nubian plucking oranges
At Jaffa by a sea of malachite
In red tarboosh, green sash, and flowing white
Burnous—among the shadowy memories
That haunt me yet by these bleak northern seas
He lives for ever in my eyes' delight,
Bizarre, superb in young immortal might—
A god of old barbaric mysteries . . .

W. W. GIBSON

When the Moon is Full . . .

The night train from Camagüey to Havana was hurrying us towards the end of our Caribbean journey.

In the south-eastern corner of the island, far beyond the shimmering cordilleras through which we were travelling, lay the city of Santiago, the first capital of Cuba. What a wonderful town it sounds, with its High Renaissance churches in the Florentine style, its Tuscan altars and its castles, museums and palaces. It epitomizes for Spaniards who have not crossed the Atlantic all that is most exotic and beautiful in the islands of their lost empire, and it has proved the theme for a poem by Lorca that is almost a metrical litany of nostalgia. Nothing is omitted: the sound of the trade winds in the palm trees, the click of the wooden instruments, the rhythm of the dried seeds, the tobacco flower, the alligators:

When the moon is full, I will go to Santiago de Cuba
I will go to Santiago
In a coach of black water.
The roofs of the palm trees will sing
I will go to Santiago . . .

What an astonishing race of men these early Spaniards were! . . . Their adventures made it hard to restrict one's thoughts to the confines of this island from which so many of them had set forth; from which, in a couple of days, we were to follow them.

PATRICK LEIGH FERMOR, *The Traveller's Tree*

This Side of Paradise

Taü Here, *Mamua*,
Crown the hair, and come away !
Hear the calling of the moon,
And the whispering scents that stray
About the idle warm lagoon.
Hasten, hand in human hand,
Down the dark, the flowered way,
Along the whiteness of the sand,
And in the water's soft caress,
Wash the mind of foolishness,
Mamua, until the day.
Spend the glittering moonlight there
Pursuing down the soundless deep
Limbs that gleam and shadowy hair,
Or floating lazy, half-asleep.
Dive and double and follow after,
Snare in flowers, and kiss, and call,
With lips that fade, and human laughter
And faces individual,
Well this side of Paradise ! . . .
There's little comfort in the wise.

RUPERT BROOKE, 1887-1915

On Following the Sun

Banishment is no grievance at all . . . and such things commonly please us best which are most strange and come farthest off . . . 'Tis a childish humour to hone after home, to be discontent at that which others seek ; to prefer, as base Icelanders and Norwegians do, their own ragged island before Italy or Greece, the gardens of the world . . .

All places are distant from heaven alike, the sun shines haply as warm in one city as in another, and to a wise man there is no difference of climes ; friends are everywhere to him that behaves himself well, and a prophet is not esteemed in his own country.

ROBERT BURTON, 1577-1640, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*

The Golden Road

We travel not for trafficking alone ;
By hotter winds our fiery hearts are fanned :
For lust of knowing what should not be known,
We take the Golden Road to Samarkand.

JAMES ELROY FLECKER, 1884-1915, *Hassan*

★*Good things do not always come to their expected end, and readers who enjoyed "A Rough Shoot," published recently in* ARGOSY*—and those who are to meet Mr. Household's delightful characters for the first time—will welcome his brilliant new story. Roger Taine, the hero of "A Rough Shoot," has escaped the tangled web of intrigue and danger only to become entangled all over again! And this time with a surprising new ally . . .*

The First Part of

A TIME TO KILL

by GEOFFREY HOUSEHOLD

ROLAND had telephoned me to look him up the next time I was in London, and, when I answered that it wouldn't be for a month, had asked me casually, but insistently, if I couldn't drive up some time during the week-end and have lunch with him.

So there I was in his flat with a silent, Sunday London outside. I fear I was very smug with self-satisfaction, warmed by the strength of the pink gins before lunch and a pleasurable sense of being wanted by a man who didn't lightly give his confidence. That I was wanted a deal more elsewhere did not, then, impress me at all. When Cecily and the children showed themselves a little hurt that I should use a free Sunday to go to London, I remember pointing out—I hope not too pompously—that I was still on the Reserve, and that an order, however it was given, was an order.

"You'll never believe who has had the cheek to come and see me," said Roland.

"Somebody I know?" I asked.

"I don't think you ever actually spoke, but you certainly knew each other. It was Pink."

Pink wasn't a man against whom I bore any malice. True, he had fired a few shots in my general direction, but even in them there was a certain style. He wasn't a treacherous, slinking, brilliant type like his former boss, Colonel Hiart. He was just a disappointed, simple-minded romantic, who had made the country too hot to hold him.

"Where's he living?"

"Alone on a boat," Roland said. "And he thinks it safe enough—what Pink would call safe enough—to lie low in the Essex marshes. He has grown a beard and nobody knows that he's in England. I ought to hand him over to the police. They want him for attempted murder and illegal landing of aircraft. But they would have more trouble in getting a conviction than he's worth."

Roland always talked of the police as if they were a body of incal-

culable experts whose opinions must be respected but could only be guessed. He seemed on excellent terms with Scotland Yard, and an inspector of the Special Branch had treated him, in my presence, with a grim and humorous deference. That indeed was all I knew of Roland, except that he had financed Peter Sandorski's underground. The only time I ever asked him a direct question—whether he belonged to the Foreign Office or the War Office—he laughed and said he didn't know himself.

" I'll put you in the picture," he went on. " Sandorski had a most valuable week in Vienna, and on the strength of his report we were able to act. The new fascism is just as dead abroad as Heyne-Hassingham's People's Union in England.

" But if you don't let political lunatics have one toy to play with, they'll soon find another. Members of the People's Union and its allied parties abroad have split like this : chaps who were trying to escape from monotony have taken to religion or societies with comic hats ; and chaps who just wanted to be ordered about have drifted towards communism. That seems incredible to us, but there it is ! You'll remember that ex-communists made some of Hitler's toughest Nazis ; and today in Germany it's the ex-Nazi who makes the toughest communist.

" Now friend Pink is a Brer Rabbit—allus somewhar, whar he ain't got no bizness. He's been in bad company, and on one such occasion he heard a couple of drunk German fellow-travellers blabbing away, all full of German tears and hatred, when they thought they were alone. So he came to me. He's an old-fashioned patriot, is Pink, and born a couple of hundred years after he should have been.

" How far what he heard is a genuine plan or a dream of a plan or just pot-house talk worked up by Pink's imagination, I don't know. But this is it—Plot with the deepest, darkest P for communist agents to go round this country spreading foot-and-mouth disease."

I said it was just the sort of yarn that any stalwart of the People's Union would think up to frighten old ladies and get their subscriptions.

" Oh yes," said Roland, " I warned Pink that he must think up a better yarn than that one, and told him to get back on board quick, or I'd let the police know he was in London. I wish now that I had had a little more patience. You've seen this, I suppose ? "

He passed me a newspaper cutting. It joyfully reported the preposterous story put out by East German communists that American aircraft had dropped Colorado beetles on their potato fields.

" They must have minds like Pink's," I said.

" Pink ? Not a bit ! He's thrashing the air all the time. Whereas these people—well, the only sure thing is that they calculate every move to the last place of decimals. And not a fault in the arithmetic—except, thank God, that their axioms are all wrong !

" According to our experts, Roger, this beetle story can only mean that they themselves have committed, or intend to commit or might intend to commit some very similar crime. Then, if they are caught, they can say it was justifiable retaliation.

" Of course experts are always too ingenious, and I'm utterly

unconvinced. The game wouldn't be worth the candle, you see. It's true that Pink's story fits their policy of pin-pricks in sore spots. But they'd be caught, and they must know it."

" Well, that rules it out," I said.

" It should and it does," he answered. " And yet I wish I had heard of this Colorado beetle stunt before I turned Pink out of my office."

Pink had put himself completely into Roland's power—proof, at any rate, that he had made himself believe his own story. He had told Roland both the false name that he was using and the name of his little cruiser. She was too small and unimportant to be registered anywhere ; and so long as he kept to quiet anchorages and didn't visit yacht clubs, nobody was likely to bother him until the end of the summer.

There was a warrant out for him, however, and if he drew any attention to himself he was pretty sure to be picked up by the police. Roland couldn't and wouldn't guarantee him freedom from arrest, and was most unwilling to have any direct dealings with him. So he had conceived the unprincipled idea that Pink should communicate with him through me. Had I any objection ?

" But why me ? " I protested.

" Well, he was going round at once from Essex to Poole on the track of his precious plot," Roland answered, " and as he won't be far from you and knows your part of Dorset well, I thought it would be easy for him to hop on a bus or a bicycle and see you after dark if he had anything further to report."

I didn't receive Roland's proposal with any enthusiasm. The last thing I wanted was that bandit Pink turning up in the middle of the night and upsetting Cecily. I suggested that Pink's feelings towards me could hardly be those of a friendly caller.

" Good lord, he's too much of a fighting man to resent defeat," Roland insisted. " And anyway he must think you were always obeying my orders. Love me, love my dog ! So be a good fellow, and let me tell Pink that he can call on you if he must."

THINKING it all over on my drive home, I came to the conclusion that Pink was unlikely to bother me. His whole story was an extravagant effort to put himself right with the police, and I was surprised that Roland even thought him worth an envelope and stamp. He was certainly giving him no more—no help, no money and no faith.

I made good time—considering the road was full of Sunday evening traffic going in the opposite direction—and arrived home before Jerry's and George's bedtime. It was a glorious June evening ; so, to give them a treat, Cecily and I pretended to make a picnic out of their simple supper, and drove them up to Hardy's Monument to eat it. We could see a hundred miles of the Channel, all the way from the Needles to Start Point.

The slim, grey streaks of the warships in Portland Harbour made me feel more kindly towards Pink. Somewhere he was in all that blue,

alone in his boat, a white speck lost at five miles' distance, without wife or children and looking back on his broken career as a sailor. But if he *would* think he was Nelson, what did he expect ? You can't disobey orders and get away with it—at least, you can't if you're a bull-headed lunatic like Pink. And then, after that, to take up with the People's Union and run the risk of being tried for high treason !

The children were dashing about, picking up spent cartridges from the heather, when Cecily asked me how the interview with Roland had gone. I said that he wanted to use me as a post-box—which, so far as it went, was true. There was no point in worrying her with Pink's morbid inventions.

" Is that all ? " she asked.

" It's all he's going to get," I answered positively.

I meant it, too, as I watched my boys tumbling after each other in and out of the hollows, their faces glowing in the last rays of the red sun. Then Cecily began to fuss because they hadn't enough sweaters on ; so we chased and caught them, and took them home to bed.

I gave little more thought to Pink and Roland, except to wish in moments of disgruntled self-analysis—the ten minutes, for example, while one shaves a solemn and far too familiar face—that I hadn't gone rushing off to London so easily. I knew very well that my motive had been sheer vanity, for I needed nothing, and least of all Roland's complications, to put more interest in my life.

After all the excitement on my bit of rough shooting, I was for a few months a minor celebrity in South Dorset. Everyone knew that I had been wanted for murder—though only for a single night—and that I had come out of it all with a mysterious and official pat on the back. So, of course, it was generally decided that Mr. Roger Taine was Something in the Secret Service.

It was good for business, too. I got a lot of new clients among the builders and builders' merchants who merely wanted to have a look at me, and I managed to keep most of them—thanks to the first-class stuff our group produces. So all was well at home, and trade so steady that I actually managed to save a little capital from the income tax collector. I was a contented man, and knew it.

ABOUT three weeks after my lunch with Roland, Pink called me up at the office. He was discreet, though hearty, and I couldn't make out who he was until he said that I owed him a motor-cycle. I apologised for smashing it, and assured him, feeling a tactless barbarian, that I had hoped it belonged to the party. No, he replied, his ; but it really didn't matter. That we could have so polite a conversation amazed me ; yet I ought to have known that Pink's manners—however detestable his character—would come out of the top drawer.

He asked me to drive over and see him. I was to leave my car at a point near Lytchett Minster, and meet him at the head of an obscure creek where he would pick me up with the pram, and take me on board his boat. I must have hesitated, for he said in rather the tone of a sulky schoolboy

" Look here—give you my word of honour ! "

It was a grey afternoon, with the chill north wind of a beastly summer day, when I followed the cart track down to his creek. Poole Harbour was at its most melancholy. It can be a gay, closed, little yachtsman's paradise of blue and white, or a sunlit lake among golden heath, or, as it was that afternoon, a dull, endless marsh that made me conscious of the mud at the bottom and the reeds waving up from it like dead men's hair.

Pink was at the rendezvous, standing in his sea-boots as still as a heron. Our earlier meetings, in dusk or at night, had never really shown him to me. He was an uncompromising figure in his shabby blue jersey, slim at the hips and broad as a fallen angel across the shoulders. His nose was slightly twisted to one side, and his forehead was scored with deep, puzzled wrinkles. The brown beard gave him distinction. Without that, I might have found his face a shade brutal.

He held out his hand as if we had just met in Piccadilly after long absence. I would have shaken it more warmly if he had not been quite so casual.

I sat cautiously in the stern of his eight-foot pram, while he filled all the rest of it and paddled us down the creek. His boat, *Olwen*, lay at anchor in a brown pool which the scour of the tide had bitten out of the flank of a reed-covered island. There were two narrow channels on either side of the island up which the flood was making, and would have to make for another hour before *Olwen* could twist a snipe's course out into the harbour. The anchorage was even lonelier than any I had imagined for Pink.

She was a thirty-foot boat with a turtle deck forward, an open cockpit, and no virtues to my landsman's eye except that she was obviously meant to be used in all weathers. When we were on board, I could see that she drew a foot or two more water than I had thought. There was good head-room in the single cabin.

I HAD expected to find the disorder of a lonely and demoralised man ; but I had forgotten Pink's naval training. *Olwen* was packed so tight with stores and gear that one seemed to be standing in the middle of an expensively fitted dressing-case. The lids and doors of innumerable lockers were all closed and all neatly painted. There was a fairly clean, dark blue cover on the settee, and very clean curtains framing the ports. Two shelves of books—mostly nautical almanacks and such-like—had been built around the shining brass chronometer. Drinks were laid out ready, the bottles reflected in the teak of the little cabin table.

Pink was very cordial. I might have been visiting any well-bred eccentric who chose to live alone on a boat. I hated to refer to business (which had inevitably to involve some reference to the past), but Roland would certainly want, besides whatever message for him Pink might have, some kind of report from me on the man.

" You've lived on board ever since . . . ? " I began.

" No. Portugal at first—till it got too hot. Some of the leaders of

our Movement began to play around with communists. You know all about that."

"And you got tarred with the same brush ?" I asked.

"Yes. God, what a lot of scum ! They approached me directly. Said they wanted chaps of my sort. The leader class."

His beastly fascist phrase nearly drew a protest from me, but I turned it into a grunt of understanding.

"They do," he went on, "badly. But they won't keep 'em alive a day longer than they can use 'em. Well, I did some jobs for them. I thought I might find out a thing or two. That was the only reason. I expect you to believe it," he added, looking me hard in the eyes.

I had no difficulty in believing it. If there ever was a dyed-in-the-wool anti-communist, it was Pink.

"Didn't they suspect you ?" I asked.

"Less than you'd think. They can't understand a man being a patriot when he's been as badly treated as I have. And then—I don't know whether Roland told you— they framed me. One of the jobs I did—well, no need to go into detail, but it was an extraditable crime. Anywhere. They took the trouble to show me the evidence they would use if I ever turned nasty."

That seemed a powerful proof of Pink's good faith—if it were true.

"They know what you have found out ?"

"Impossible. It was a pure accident, my overhearing those chaps."

"And where you are—I suppose they know that ?"

"I can't be sure, but it's unlikely. I bought this old lady "—he patted the white-painted curve that separated us from the sea—" for cash, and filled her up with fuel and made England in one hop. Then I began to follow up the tip I had got. I'm ready now. I'm going to use my own methods. And you're just the man I'd like to have with me."

I thanked him for his good opinion—there was no point in telling him that his own methods were certain to be disastrous—and said I was there to help him.

"Then you'll come with me," he ordered—I swear it was an order—" to burgle a house in Bournemouth."

"Sorry !" I said. "No !"

"A communist's house. You can't refuse."

My broad grin spoilt his fantasy. He saw himself for the moment, I think, as a gallant outlaw captain whose commands could only meet with instant acceptance or cowardly refusal. It was a shock to him that I should find those commands merely comic.

"I forgot," he said. "Damn it, why should any of you trust me ?"

I explained apologetically that it was just the idea of Bournemouth communists which I couldn't take seriously.

But, of course, he might be right. I could live in the blackest industrial area, and never for a moment believe that revolution would make it any pleasanter ; but long residence in any of the south coast Blankmouths, full of folk with a sense of their own importance and nothing much to show for it, might make a communist of me in desperation.

" Anyway, if you want to burgle a desirable, pine-clad villa," I said, " you'll bloody well have to burgle it by yourself. And don't imagine for a moment that we're going to keep you out of quod."

" You can go to hell, Taine," he answered superbly. " All I want from you is to pass on what I shall give you."

As he paddled me back up the creek, I was convinced of the absolute futility of Pink. We were as silent and sullen as the brown water which had flooded the banks while we talked. I loathed the jargon which he used instead of thought. Would he ever understand, I wondered, that the proudest claim any man could make was to belong to the Servant Class ? But, of course, at bottom he did. That was what was wrong with him and his former friends of the People's Union. They were ready enough to be Servants, but nobody wanted their services.

Nobody, nobody at all, wanted them. Oh, I don't know what it was that overwhelmed me with pity for the man—whether the motionless melancholy of Poole Harbour, or just his loneliness, which was emphasised, like that of some old maid, by the scrupulous neatness of his living-quarters.

Whatever it was, I made one of those irrevocable remarks which change the course of a life. They are nearly always charitable remarks. One impulsively slaps someone else's burden on top of one's pack, and there it sticks for good.

" Pink," I said, " what's the latest you can put me on shore ? "

" Three hours from now."

" Look here, if you care to take me back on board and spend those three hours telling your story—all of it, not just hints—I promise not to be hasty."

He swung the little pram round on her own axis, and paddled me back to *Olwen*. Until we were on board he didn't say a word except to mumble that there was plenty of gin.

I SHALL try not to put down anything that Pink did not tell me or imply, and I shall leave out his political asides. It is enough to say that the only type of man that met with his approval was the chap selflessly doing a job in a Kiplingesque manner. Of this rare but admirable creature he felt that his own country had a monopoly, and that if foreigners and the masses could only be brought to see the value of him, the world might be run like a healthy public school.

You must imagine such a man standing on the waterfront of Lisbon with a valid passport, money enough, and some letters of introduction to friends whom he felt to be dubious. When he was organising the rough stuff for the People's Union, he may have felt the romance of a movement which passed all frontiers—generally illegally —and he was quite at home with the bad characters of several nations. But he hadn't felt himself to be one of them, and he didn't much care for the society which was awaiting him.

He liked it a lot less that first night. After plenty of drinks and mutual commiseration, he came to anchor in a quiet restaurant with an Italian, a German and a Portuguese.

Pink's reputation had preceded him ; those letters of introduction, too, had been fulsome in praise of his audacity. Consequently the German and Italian felt free to talk. Their conversation played over the incidents of exile and after-war agitation—abortive plots, provoking of strikes, the personal weaknesses of intelligence officers, kidnappings to and from the Russian zones ; and, as the red wine, for which the Portuguese was paying, slid down into their bellies, they were frank in discussion of ways for a bold man to earn his living on the fringes of politics. It shook Pink badly to see that these two comrades took him to be as ruthless a soldier of fortune as they. That wasn't his picture of himself at all. He was an English gentleman, exiled for the sake of his opinions.

The Portuguese had little to contribute beyond the drinks. He remained smiling and courteous, and, towards the end of the dinner, turned his attention exclusively to Pink. He assured him that Portugal was honoured by his presence, that he would have no trouble whatever with the authorities, and that if he, Pink, would obligingly keep an eye on British seamen and officers, and report from time to time . . .

He took credit for not smashing a plate on the secret policeman's head. Restraint of that sort he called tact.

In the weeks that followed, Pink, idly and morosely trailing between flashy bars and secretive cafés, began to appreciate where he stood, and had a vision of the scum that every fascist wave carries along with it.

A sensible man with Pink's private income, who couldn't return to his own country, would have bought himself a little sunny estate and settled down to a new life. Pink, however, couldn't keep out of mischief. His scheme for rehabilitating himself in his own eyes was to dive a bit deeper into the scum, with the vague intent of being on duty as a one-man secret service.

By this time he was well in with the Lisbon Germans. His particular friend was a certain Ritter, an ex-Nazi and former naval officer, of a far superior type to the German he had met on the evening of his arrival. Pink trusted him absolutely. They used to weep together over the Europe that might have been, if ever England and Germany had been allies, and they speculated happily on whether a communism in which the commissars were gentlemen might not be a very desirable state of affairs. Poor old Pink began to see himself in a double rôle—as saviour of the decent world by the force of this magnificent idea, and, at the same time, as Borer from Within.

Ritter must have been chosen with considerable care to guide Pink along the way he should go. He put him to work as a courier to Italy. The job seemed natural enough to Pink ; after all, he could travel freely—so long as he kept clear of territories under British control—and the German exiles could not. That he should be on friendly terms with ex-fascist communists in Milan, who were surprisingly easy to dine and drink with, did not disturb him. Wasn't it necessary to be an ally of communism in order to control it ?

As soon as Pink had exhibited his remarkable facility for believing fairy-tales—and, I suppose, his talent for skulduggery of all sorts—

his employers must have considered that he should be tied to them by more than loyalty. Ritter filled him up with a bit of romance exactly calculated to appeal to Pink. He was to help in the rescue of a political prisoner who was being deported from Portugal.

Pink helped all right, but found himself alone in the night, on a country road, with a stolen taxi and a dead prisoner. He cleared out instantly and on foot—at the cost of leaving his finger-prints all over the dead man's baggage and the car. Ritter was full of apologies and explanations. He told Pink that he couldn't expect to play with fire without occasionally being burnt, and sent him over to Tangier to be out of the way.

PINK'S life was becoming too complicated even for him. So, when he was offered the command, indeed the nominal ownership, of a neat little motor-cruiser that could do a hundred and fifty miles in one night, he refused. He was then reminded that if a set of his finger-prints, with his name and address at the bottom, were sent to the Portuguese police, he wouldn't be able to put up much of a defence. That was true. Pink didn't know who had fired that shot from the dark roadside, or why. He could only tell the jury the orders that Ritter had given him, and insist that he had been double-crossed. Ritter himself was out of reach. He had at last returned to Eastern Germany and vanished.

" And if he ever comes out," Pink shouted, " I'll get him if I have to follow him for a month."

I must admit that I found his longing for revenge somewhat over-dramatic and Italianate. I had still to learn that there are times when a man will kill as ruthlessly as in war, and with a hatred that is utterly unknown in war.

Well, Pink could do nothing but accept. The motor-cruiser's papers were in perfect order ; and what more natural than that Pink, as a former naval officer under a cloud, should be living on a boat and idling away his time between Tangier and the fishing ports of Spain and Portugal ? When a job had to be done, his orders were brought to him by a Spaniard, who thereafter stayed on board, ostensibly as a paid hand.

Meanwhile the one-man secret service was pretty well played out. Pink did not even know whether his employers were communists or Ritter's ambitious fellow-travellers or just a gang. What he was doing was plain enough—ferrying to and from North Africa people who did not wish their movements to be known. He was even tempted sometimes to run into Gibraltar and throw himself on the mercy of naval intelligence officers.

ONE day in early March his Spanish hand came on board and gave him orders to proceed to Faro in Portugal, pick up a passenger, drop him in an inlet west of Cape Spartel, and take him back to Portugal the next night. Pink, who was then lying at Tangier, first went round the Cape to see what sort of place he was supposed to get into.

The inlet was only some ten miles from Tangier by land. There was a nasty sand-bar across the mouth, which was enough to discourage the curious, but could be crossed at the top of the tide provided the swell from the open Atlantic was not too heavy. The north bank of the inlet was obviously the property of a European. There were fields of lucerne, neatly wired, and a lot of paddocks and barns, with an attractive villa set above them on the terraced hillside. The estate looked like some sort of experimental station.

" Holberg's place, of course ! " said Pink. " He'd been working there since the early 1920's. I don't think anyone took him seriously. Tangier is too full of people with crazy hobbies."

The Spaniard told him that a scientist who had been a refugee in Portugal, and was now—like Ritter—returning to Eastern Germany, was anxious to consult Holberg before he left, but had been refused a visa for Tangier. He added that Holberg had no politics at all—which agreed with all that Pink had heard about him.

Well, Pink collected the eminent colleague without any trouble, put him ashore on Holberg's land and saw him escorted through the lucerne by a picturesque Berber servant in baggy pants. Pink and the Spaniard returned to their moorings in Tangier harbour, and set out the next evening to take the chap up again. He didn't come down to the creek at the appointed time, and after midnight, when there was only an hour left to catch the tide, Pink strolled up to the villa to see what was wrong.

He had a friendly chat with the Berber servant who was on guard in the patio between the wings of the house. The Berber told him to go round to the front door and ring the bell.

On his way round the house he passed the great east window of the living-room. The curtains were not drawn tight. He looked through ; and there were the two Germans as drunk as students on a Saturday night, and happily gathered round a Christmas tree. His passenger kept passing a hand under the foliage and cackling with laughter. Then he would brush something off his hand into a tray beneath the tree.

Pink was interested. The plan of the room was inviting—at any rate to a rash lunatic such as Pink. On the side opposite the patio was a row of thick, low arches in the Spanish colonial style, and beyond them two doors into the entrance hall. If one of the doors opened quietly, he could enter the room unperceived by the occupants ; if it didn't, he could always excuse himself on the grounds that he was looking for his passenger.

That villa, he said, was clean and fresh as a ship. Holberg evidently liked the night air of early spring to blow right through it. Pink accompanied the breeze through a window, and so into the entrance hall. The two doors into the long living-room were obvious. He chose one, slipped through and jumped behind a pillar. Pink, when he liked, could move like a scrum-half with leopard's paws for boots. I'd had experience of it.

He was in cover for the moment, but as soon as one of those boozing Germans got up to leave the room he had to be seen, single or

double. There was nothing to hide him but a tall, tapestried chair in the corner of the room. He moved from pillar to pillar, and so to the chair. He described himself as being perfectly safe behind it. It wouldn't occur to him that he might sneeze, or that someone might want the chair. He wasn't blessed with that sort of imagination.

Holberg and passenger were certainly taking their hair down over the bottles. They had reverted to the noisy indiscretions of youth. That, evidently, was Holberg's form of relaxation ; to drink himself riotous once a month or so with some chosen companion. The passenger was just the man for him—and they were having fun with heavy technical jokes that weren't at all easy to understand. Indeed, they were having fun at the expense of everything but themselves, the communist party included. It was frankly assumed between them that they had joined the party because it offered the only hope of revenge on the brother—yes, they called them brother—Anglo-Saxons.

Then the Christmas tree came in for more attention. Now that Pink could observe it more closely, he saw that it wasn't a tree, but branches of some North African thorn standing in a big vase, or, perhaps, potted in earth. It pleased the passenger to baptise the leaves of the thorn with wine and to giggle because something—Pink didn't know the word he used—was remarkably resistant to alcohol.

After a bit they reached a solemn and tearful state of mutual admiration. Pink's passenger stood up and made a set speech to his colleague in imitation of a chancellor or public orator conferring high honours upon him. The missing word, now repeated in several contexts, was clear. The things on the thorn which the passenger had attracted to his hand and baptised with wine were cattle ticks.

Pink admitted that even if he had been a vet he couldn't have given a detailed account of what he overheard ; he claimed, however, to be sure of the main facts.

It was clear that Holberg had been working for years on an anti-toxin for foot-and-mouth disease, and had managed to establish the virus in a strain of cattle ticks. The tick was none the worse, and, if removed from an infected cow when swollen with blood, it could be brewed up by some process or other, and the anti-bodies extracted from the mash. Pink's passenger was congratulating Holberg on his discovery of a prophylactic against the disease.

That was not all. Those little specks, poised on the outer tips of the thorn branches, ready to fall on the outstretched hand or any other convenient feeding-ground which passed beneath them, transmitted the virus from one to another, and increased its activity in the process. Holberg's ticks, dead, gave immunity ; alive, they gave a most malignant form of the disease.

The two Germans lowered their voices, and the next remark that Pink heard distinctly was from his passenger.

" You're out of date, dear doctor ! Out of date ! The English are only poor Europeans like the rest of us now. Gone are the days when they could just order more meat from the Argentine."

This made Pink particularly angry. That those days *were* gone was

exactly what he resented. He was frank enough to admit to me that he could concentrate on nothing but how to smash the pair of them up and get away with it, and that he missed a vital bit of conversation. When he had ceased to see red, he heard Holberg ask :

" Is he a communist ? "

" As much as you and I," the passenger replied. " He believes that only through the Russians can we Germans rule the world. He'll have full instructions, and he's a competent entomologist who has lived in England for years."

Pink waited for more, but the two drifted off into what he called beastly biological obscenities. Pink was too well brought up to appreciate two drunken scientists on the subject of sex.

He looked at his watch. He had been in the room nearly half-an-hour, and it was very possible that his Spaniard would come up from the creek to see what had happened to him, or that the Berber servant in the patio would think it suspicious that he had not returned.

Pink's luck was in. Holberg lurched over to the window, with some trite remark to the effect that God's good air was better than plumbing, and the passenger followed suit. While they were so satisfactorily engaged, Pink nipped out the way he had come, and went round to the front door and rang the bell.

Almost at once Holberg himself opened the door. Pink apologised for disturbing him, saying that he had been ringing for some time and had not been able to make anyone hear. He explained the need to catch the tide. Holberg blasted the tide, and laid it down that his guest was going to stay the night. Pink made himself as pleasant as possible, for he wanted to be invited in for a drink, and said that of course the tide didn't matter if Holberg could ensure the passenger's coming on board without being seen by any curious eyes.

Pink must have been at the top of his form during this doorstep interview, and really exercising self-control. Holberg gave him a drink, using another room, and there the Spaniard found him, jabbering away on excellent terms with Holberg and the passenger.

THE passenger came on board in the early afternoon, and slept till dusk, when they were swooping over the long swell to Portugal. He joined Pink in the wheel-house, and began to question him about the appearance of southern England, which he had never seen—but evidently knew well from books and maps.

" Not much forest ? " he asked. " Not as we know forest ? "

Pink agreed.

" And the New Forest. It is nearly all out—no ? "

Pink told him that in those days there was more heath than woodland, but still a good many acres of trees. The conversation was beginning to interest him. To hide his excitement he played the conscientious man at the wheel, and kept staring north-west into the night.

The passenger wanted to know what was the town most handy to the New Forest, and Pink said it was Southampton.

" Not Bournemouth ? "

" Well, Bournemouth would do as well."

" And the downs ? How do they look, the downs ? "

Pink told him of the hanging woods, the bracken and the furze.

"Oak, ash and thorn, eh ? " said the passenger with a sneer.

I don't suppose he was ever nearer to death than at that moment. Pink was as sentimental as any other exile, and he was boiling with anger and suspicion.

" Hawthorn and blackthorn," he answered deliberately. " Brakes of them and thick hedges of them."

" And Bournemouth is near this downland, too ? "

" Near enough," said Pink.

The passenger seemed content. He chattered away patronisingly through most of the night until they landed him at the rendezvous east of Faro.

" Now that's all I have," Pink admitted to me very honestly. " But, my God, isn't it enough ? "

I put on a decent semblance of interest, but I couldn't agree for a moment that it was enough. What did it all boil down to ? That an unreliable, unbalanced semi-gangster had, or said he had, overheard the alcoholic extravagances of two German biologists. Pink was too anxious to rehabilitate himself—and the very type to read into anything he heard just what he wanted to hear.

Still, I hadn't heard the whole story yet; and as the rest of it came hesitatingly from his bearded mouth I couldn't help being impressed by the fact that he was risking his liberty and probably his life because he believed in the truth of his own deductions.

Between voyages Pink had been left pretty much to himself, for it was essential that he should keep up the appearance of a harmless idler. He was even permitted to take short cruises on his own, so long as he let the Spaniard know where he was going and what his ports of call would be. So, after their last job, Pink told him that he thought of running down the Moroccan coast to Mogador.

As soon as the Spaniard had left, Pink filled the cabin with cans of petrol, and deliberately put out from Tangier into a threat of foul weather blowing up from the west. He was told from right and left that it was folly, and that he would never be seen again. That was what he wanted to be told, as publicly as possible.

Once clear of the land, he turned north and ran six hundred miles to Vigo, where he took on more fuel.

He cleared out of Vigo, with the weather moderating, and steered north-west across the Bay of Biscay. The Bay was in a kindly mood, and he let his boat drift, he said, and slept for twelve hours. He meant to pick up the Brittany coast at night, sink his ship and get ashore without being seen ; it would then be assumed that he was, as he deserved to be, at the bottom of the Atlantic. He didn't think that his call at Vigo was likely to be traced.

Disappearance, however, wasn't so easy, for his dinghy had been smashed by the gale beyond repair. He had no means of getting ashore. He solved the problem by lashing together a raft of empty petrol cans and gratings, upon which he paddled himself and two suit-cases into

the Bay of Morbihan. He walked through the night to Vannes. took an early west-bound train, and by the afternoon was nothing but a casual Englishman enjoying a holiday in Brittany.

In a little Breton port he bought the sardine boat that was now *Olwen*. He had her converted by a local yard, and put in a powerful Diesel and extra tanks. I gathered that for six weeks, while his beard grew and his hands were busy with plane and chisel, he was further from romantic impatience than he had ever been.

" I'd like to go shares in a little yard," he said, " if ever . . . You don't know a country where there's no extradition, do you ? "

In *Olwen*, still nameless, he disappeared again, carrying gallons of paint as cargo, and didn't touch land until he was safe in the Essex marshes. There, next morning, he was a normal unit of the local population—a casual and seemingly ignorant yachtsman, who had just brought his boat round from London and was painting her up ready for the season on a remote hard.

" Then I went to see Roland," he said. " I knew of him from People's Union days. I'd always heard he was a nasty piece of work, and he is. I see his position, of course—still, he might have had common courtesy. He just said my information was unconvincing.

" God, he made a favour of not handing me over to the police ! I told him he could go to hell if he'd just answer one question—how was a chap to set about it, if he wanted to find out who were the authorities on insects in a given town ? He dealt with that one quick as a flash. I should go to the Public Library and get out all the books on local bugs and look puzzled ; as soon as the librarian was interested, I was to tell him I'd found a blue centipede or something and couldn't identify it, and he'd be sure to put me in touch with the blokes who could."

" And it worked ? " I asked.

" Oh, yes, it worked. I tucked myself away in this anchorage, and through a Bournemouth librarian I got hold of an old codger in a back street, with drawers full of dusty beetles, who was secretary of a local bug-hunting society. I came away with a load of happy pamphlets and a short list of people who might identify my centipede. School teachers, retired Indian Army and so forth. You could rule 'em all out straight away—except one, a Dr. Losch who used to address the society from time to time. Refugee from Nazi Germany. Aryan. The usual thing. In 1940 we ran him in and in 1942 we let him out again with apologies. Well, that's the man."

" Damn it, Pink," I said, " how in the world do you know he is ? "

" Watched him. Climbed a pine tree with some sandwiches and spent a whole day watching him. And what's more, I'm not the only person watching him. There's a kind of writer chap, typing away in a window opposite Losch's drive, where he can keep an eye on all his visitors."

" Couldn't he be just staring out of the window ? " I asked.

" What for ? And I found out that Losch has got a laboratory on the second floor. I could see a bit of white tile when the door

was opened, and he was hopping in and out with glass measures and things."

"One would expect him to have a bathroom," I suggested mildly.

"Oh, to hell with you! One can tell the difference. I tell you he's the sort of man Holberg and my passenger would know. He's a competent bug-hunter. And he lives in Bournemouth."

"It's his house you intend to burgle?"

"Yes. And I'm going to find ticks."

"But if you do, they aren't evidence of anything."

"No? If I shove 'em on a cow, and the wretched cow keels over a week later, and if somebody then raids Holberg, isn't that evidence?"

Well, I could see that there was nothing for it but burglary, from Pink's point of view, if he cared to take the risk. I mentally damned Pink, Bournemouth and myself—for being a fool—but I did feel that I should have an uneasy conscience if I refused to be drawn in.

"Look here!" said Pink, seeing that I was wavering. "I heard the voices of those two swine, and you didn't. So I don't blame you for doubting. But do this much for me. Hang about while I bust in. Just pretend you're waiting for your girl or something—you're a respectable citizen, and you'll get away with it. And it's all as easy as kiss-my-hand. I know the cop's beat, and I've found a way in through the coal cellar."

We fixed up the rough details for an attempt the following night, which was Thursday. When Pink rowed me ashore for the second time, I felt towards him—well, not yet liking, but at least a god-fatherly, colonelish interest in his well-hidden virtues.

BEFORE going home, I drove into the outskirts of Bournemouth and through the streets around Losch's house. The district was pleasantly laid out in curving, leafy roads, with small patches of natural woodland. Thus, there was no lack of cover, and I felt sure that I could come and go undetected. I had no intention of being more than an observer. I was prepared to hold a watching brief for Roland, but it was understood that Pink and I in the presence of any third person simply didn't know each other.

I explained this to Cecily, emphasising that I ran no risk whatever. She wasn't impressed. She didn't like the entanglement at all.

"But you do see I couldn't refuse?" I insisted. "Pink behaved very well, and it wasn't much to ask."

"Roland hadn't any right to bring you in," she said.

I answered weakly that I liked the tradition of voluntary service. "What about all the time you put in lecturing to Women's Institutes?" I asked.

"It isn't the same," she said. "All Roland's work should be done by people who are paid by the government."

My conscience was uneasy, for I suspected that she was right, and I wasn't admitting it. But I should have been just as discontented with myself if I had refused to help Pink. It was a conversation which we should have laughed over afterwards. Mere differences of words,

of opinions, never bothered us long ; for, in the end, the underlying cause always turned out to be a clash between two different aspects of our love for each other. But, on this occasion, the atmosphere was just perceptibly cool when I left for the office in the morning, and, later, we wildly exaggerated the incident until each of us was obstinately believing things which had never been said at all.

I DINED in Bournemouth and went to a movie, and at eleven met Pink in the pine trees opposite Losch's house. He looked a villainous figure in dark blue blouse and trousers, with black canvas shoes and thin black gloves. Slung over his shoulder was one of those black-japanned metal cases used by collectors of plants—a vasculum, I believe it is called. The handle of a saw was sticking out of one of his blouse pockets, and he was bulging all over with odd tools and a couple of torches. There was also a familiar-shaped bulge at his hip. We had a bitter argument about it in low voices. Eventually I got the gun off him.

He told me that he had taken *Olwen* out into the harbour and that she now lay at anchor off The Haven. The pram was on a bit of beach not far from the old flying-boat station. If he had to run for it, he intended to go straight for the pram and return on board. If he got clear away, he would meet me at my car which was parked in another quiet road half a mile away.

Losch's property was on a corner site. The front of the house was separated from the main residential road by a short, well-gravelled drive. This eastern side, said Pink, was to be avoided at all costs ; the gravel crunched under the lightest of steps, and the drive was overlooked by the house across the road, where he claimed to have seen the man with the typewriter.

On the two interior sides, south and west, the garden was surrounded by a six-foot brick wall, with broken glass on top. The north side, flanking a second residential street, was divided from the pavement only by a stiff hedge and shrubbery. Across the street was the coppice of pine trees where we were.

" I'll show you your station," said Pink. " Up after me, and no noise ! "

He led me up a pine with conveniently spaced branches. Perched securely some twenty-five feet above the ground, we could see the whole northern side of the house and quite a bit of the front. Opposite us, beyond the shrubbery, was a flower bed and then a flagged kitchen yard where was the door of Pink's coal cellar. He had been inside earlier in the week, and found that the second door, which led into the house, had a lock which could easily be cut clean out.

Otherwise it was a house that would have been thoroughly approved by the police. The downstairs doors and windows were solid, and carefully locked. Indeed we saw Losch and a manservant methodically checking and closing them all. Then we watched the chequerboard of lights winking on and off upstairs, and followed the routine of a respectable house putting itself to sleep. It seemed to be inhabited only by Losch and a married couple.

After midnight Pink swung himself down to earth like some bearded tar of the days of sail, and slipped away beneath the trees. I saw him nip across the road into the garden next to Losch's. He preferred the wall with its broken glass to the longish process of pushing through a hedge on a road that was too long, too straight and too well lighted.

The wind was blowing up from the south-west, and the branches of my tree began to fan back and forth. I saw Pink glide along the doors of the kitchen yard and disappear. I listened, but I couldn't hear his saw. The only sounds for long minutes were the shriek of a little owl, who saw and disapproved of me, and the distant movement of heavy lorries far away in the centre of Bournemouth.

The dark block swallowed Pink, and slept on, presenting to me walls of absolute, blank negation. Then, between the flicking of the tossed branches, I thought I saw a finger of light stab into one of the downstairs rooms. If it were really there, it meant that Pink had emerged from the basement and was on his way up. Sitting safely in my pine, I couldn't imagine a viler way of making a living than burglary. It must, I supposed, have some damnable fascination.

My heart pumped intolerably—no other action being open to it—when I saw, this time quite clearly, a tiny pool of light on the floor of the bedroom which we believed to be Losch's. Through the open door of that room Pink had caught his glimpse of a sunlit passage and of the white tiles beyond, which, he would have it, didn't belong to a bathroom. I could guess what he was doing—checking his position in the house, so that he could go straight to the door he wanted. I looked at my watch and found it was nearly one.

Another ten minutes passed. Then that house burst into life with the violence of an old Bournemouth spinster finding a man under her bed. There was a crash that I could hear from my tree, two front windows were suddenly illuminated, and a voice cried : " Sir ! Sir ! " Losch's light went on, and I saw him grab his dressing-gown and something from the bedside drawer which might have been a gun. I heard a yell, and heavy footsteps drumming on the stairs. All the ground floor windows were flooded with light. The front door flew open. Losch appeared on the steps, shouting for police and blowing a whistle. Then a cop came pounding up the road and round the corner, also blowing a whistle, and dashed into the house with Losch.

There was still no sign of Pink. Where in God's name, I cursed, was he ? And what was I to do ? Then at last I saw Pink jump at the downstairs window opposite me with a heavy dining-room chair for battering-ram. The window fell out on the flagged yard with a smash that must have been heard a mile away. He followed, dived over the hedge, parting the top of it like a horse through the brushwood of a steeplechase jump, and landed on his hands. He kicked his feet clear, and charged across the road into the pines. His figure was extraordinary ; it flashed through my mind that his back must have been broken in a struggle. Then I saw him hauling the vasculum out of his blouse ; it was that which had given him his pigeon-breasted appearance. Without a word he dropped it at the foot of my tree,

bolted back on to the road and started to sprint down it with the cop and Losch's manservant after him.

A black police car shrieked round that respectable corner and joined in the chase. Pink saw or heard it in time, and vanished from the road. The police were out of the car and after him in five seconds—but my money was on Pink.

There was wild excitement around my corner. All the little, well-bred terriers of the district were yapping their heads off and pretending they had noticed something wrong before the human beings. In half a dozen houses the lights were on, and somewhere a woman was having hysterics in the same key as the small dogs. Still, nobody had ventured out into the road, and it was evident that this was the moment to pick up the vasculum. I slid down to the ground and grabbed it.

My next move had to be decided on the instant. I hadn't any excuse for walking away through streets that didn't lead anywhere at a quarter past one in the morning. On the other hand, if I stayed where I was, I must chance a search of the coppice by the police.

I compromised and tried to get clear of all those desirable but very noisy residences without leaving cover. It couldn't be done. The pines extended over a mere couple of acres in the shape of a triangle. Houses or walls forced me on to one road or the other. No doubt, if I had been Pink, I should have gone on regardless of walls ; but the last thing I wanted was to be caught stumbling through somebody's private property on such a night. So, sticking feebly to my legal right to be on common land, I plunged into a clump of massive rhododendrons on the edge of the eastern road. They were old enough and strong enough for me to stand uncomfortably between two forks a few feet off the ground.

I was only just in time. Bournemouth police went through that coppice like a dose of methodical salts. They couldn't, of course, be sure that the escaped burglar had an accomplice, but, if he had, that bit of cover was the place for him. They found with ease that very climbable tree, marked by our shoes and those of uncountable boys, and they sent an active young detective up it. They had a quick look at my rhododendrons, but since I was, as it were, in the middle air, they missed me.

At two, when all was clear and the residents of that select district had returned to bed, I ventured out and slunk rapidly down the road, with the strap of the vasculum over my shoulder. My imagination, violently stimulated in the rhododendrons, had produced a possible story for anyone who asked me to account for myself. I was going to say that I had been out catching moths.

I turned a couple of corners and then walked, trying to remember that I was a citizen confident of his innocence, straight along the pavement to the place, some four hundred yards away, where I had parked my car. When I came to a bright street lamp I stopped, rather abruptly and without forethought, to satisfy my curiosity about the possible contents of the vasculum. This unexpected halt caught my follower on the wrong foot. I heard his steps and looked

round. He did his best to appear to be casually crossing the road. I didn't open the vasculum, and pretended to be looking at my watch. Then on we walked, the unknown about fifty yards behind me and now on the other side of the road.

I WAS half-way to safety and my car when I met a solitary constable. I wished him goodnight in what I hoped was a cultured and respectable tone, and he was, I think, going to pass on after a sharp scrutiny when a voice shouted with surprising authority :

" Constable, stop that man ! "

There was nothing to be gained by bolting, so I smiled at the cop and said that, Good Lord, I hoped I hadn't been trespassing or anything.

My follower came running up. He had a sharp, unshaven face and a muffler tucked untidily into his waistcoat. He looked, to my relief, a bit woolly and intellectual. The police don't like that sort, and I had little doubt that the word of a decent and innocent business man would be taken against the stranger's.

" I live opposite Dr. Losch's house," he said with a keen precision, " which has just been broken into. I saw this man leaving the trees across the road in a suspicious manner. I wish you to question him."

" What trees ? I've been in a lot of trees," I protested indignantly. " I've been watching moths."

" May I have your name and address, sir ? " asked the policeman with judicial neutrality.

I gave it him, together with my business card and some odd letters in my pocket.

" That's quite all right, sir. And might I see what you have in that there tin case ? "

I opened it with a silent prayer that Pink had laid off Dr. Losch's silver. There was nothing inside but a few twigs of thorn. The thorn wasn't like any English thorn that I knew. In the semi-darkness I couldn't see whether the twigs were inhabited.

" That's quite all right, sir," the constable said. " And perhaps you would tell me where you're for now."

" Back to my car. A grey saloon parked just off the road two hundred yards on. You may have noticed it as you came along."

" I am very sorry to have troubled you," the stranger said to me, with a slight rolling of his 'r's, " and you, too, constable."

" That's quite all right, sir," the cop replied. " Our job would be a sight easier if all the public was as helpful. Now you're one as notices things, and if you could remember seeing the *right* man . . ."

" You know what he looks like ? " the stranger interrupted eagerly.

" The man as the police would like to interview, sir, is—" He opened his notebook and refreshed his memory. " Height about six feet. Build strong and active. Brown beard. Nose been broken. Wearing dark blue battledress or garment resembling the same. Might be a seaman."

" Nose broken," repeated the stranger. " Is anything known of his politics ? "

"He didn't hardly stop long enough to have a friendly chat," the policeman grinned.

He said goodnight, and moved on into the dark and obedient road. The stranger walked along with me towards my car, apologizing fulsomely and making it appear that he accompanied me merely because he could not bring himself to stop talking. I wasn't in the least afraid of him; indeed, I wanted him to give some more of himself away. That question of his about Pink's politics was so utterly un-English.

He tried to entangle the conversation in moths, but I wasn't having any. I just said that the lepidoptera of towns were a most interesting study, and passed on to simulated enthusiasm over the trees and gardens of Bournemouth.

So we came to the car. He stood talking, evidently reluctant to let me go without a clearer personal impression of me. The facts he had already—my name, my home and business addresses, and the number of my car. I gossiped away as if I loved the man, for I held all the cards. With every moment I was growing more suspicious of him, and he, as he listened to my prattlings of wife and family, had less and less reason to be suspicious of me.

I even offered to run him home, but no, he couldn't think of it. And we were still standing talking by the car when Pink charged out of the bushes and caught the man a clip on the side of the head that knocked him flat in the road.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" I shouted, as if I'd never seen Pink before in my life. "By God, it's the chap the policeman described!"

Pink stood there, hesitant, with an air of raging stupidity as of some brute of a dog which has just attacked the postman and been called to order.

The stranger raised himself up, and coolly flashed a light on Pink's face. "The Portuguese police would like him, too," he said.

I think that was no more than an inspired guess—on the evidence of the twisted nose and the opportunity that Pink, if he were still alive, might have had of penetrating Holberg's secrets. But Pink's face showed that the shot had gone home; also, he dropped his hand to the pocket where his gun ought to have been and, as I then thanked God, was not.

The stranger turned his back on us and walked steadily away. It must have been obvious to him that, whoever I was, I wanted to avoid a scandal, and that this was the moment to extricate himself. But he was certainly putting a brave trust in English law and order.

"You blazing, bloody idiot!" I hissed at Pink. "What on earth did you do that for?"

"Damn you! He's the chap with the typewriter who watches Losch's house," he answered furiously.

"Well, what of it?"

"God, Taine! Do you think that after all that trouble I'd let him force his way into your car and get the case back?"

I explained, choking with forced patience, that I was persuading

him to get in, and that he hadn't the slightest suspicion of me.

"Well, how could I know, with half a gale blowing from me to you?" he roared. "Lord, man, I was thinking of the country, not your politenesses!"

"Pink, the trouble with you is that you hit first and think afterwards," I said, "country or not. For God's sake, shave off that beard and change your clothes and get out of Poole Harbour tonight. Where will I find you?"

He stormed some more to cover his misery. And misery it was—though I doubt if I had realized then that Pink knew when he had made a fool of himself as quickly as anyone else.

"I'll go round to West Bay," he grumbled. "I've kept pretty quiet up the harbour, and there's a lot of beards about. It'll take the police a few days to get on to the chap who was living in *Olwen*, and by that time your fellow Roland will be able to call 'em off."

He looked hard at me, as if trying to find enough friendliness left in my eyes for him to sink his pride and ask a favour.

"Get him to give me a break over that Portuguese business if he can."

I assured him curtly that of course I would, and that everything possible would be done for him if the ticks proved the truth of his story. Then I said goodbye. Poor Pink! I wonder how many times in his life he had been within reach of astounding success, and then had to listen to some commanding officer—or mere associate, such as I—blistering him with contempt and anger.

Even there at the roadside I could see what disastrous complications he had introduced into the beautiful simplicity of his raid. He had not only wrecked his own clever and heroic effort to prove his own death, but he had given away the reason why Losch's house had been entered, and warned at least one interested party. The stranger's attitude both to me and to the policeman had shown that he was consumed by curiosity, utterly in the dark, and had not even recognized the contents of the vasculum for what they were.

When I left Pink, I drove straight home. I can't blame myself for that decision. I wanted to see Cecily and assure her that all was well, a perfectly natural decision for the father of a family. There was no point in charging off to Roland then and there. I wasn't afraid of anything the stranger could do. I didn't think he was likely to set the police on me, and, if he did, I should have no difficulty in persuading any of my acquaintances at County Headquarters to accompany me and the vasculum to London, and hear the truth of the story.

I got home soon after three, dragged Cecily out of bed to join me in a drink she didn't want, and had a look at the contents of the vasculum in a good light. The thorn twigs were well inhabited; there was a score of little black and motionless dots under and on the tips of the leaves. Cecily was rather silent. She tried to echo my note of triumph—for I did feel that I had reason to be proud of my belief in Pink—but she didn't sound quite real. Like many women who are by nature guarded and thoughtful, her true opinion

is to be found not in what she says but in the inflections of her voice when she says it.

"Why didn't you go to Roland straight away?" she asked.

"I wanted to see you," I answered.

"You should have thought of that earlier," she said.

It was an obscure remark, but it made me feel guilty. During the war she was a model Spartan wife. In time of peace, however, avoidable anxiety is not fair.

I SLEPT heavily and late. She, I gathered, did not; for she told me in the morning that three cars, or the same car three times, had passed our house just before dawn. That was, indeed, a rare event on our country road but I wasn't, or refused to be, impressed. After all, we were in well-policed England, and this time—unlike that very unpleasant night the previous autumn when I was on the run—the police would be on my side.

Cecily took Jerry and George to school in the village. After that she was going to see the vicar—for some reason it is impossible in the country to indulge in any normal community activity without seeing the vicar—so she said goodbye until the evening. I finished my bacon and eggs, and then picked up the telephone to make an appointment with Roland. The line was dead.

I went outside to see if the wire from my house to the pole had been interfered with. It hadn't. Then I remembered that the night had been blustery, and I declined to be affected by Cecily's mood of foreboding. The line, after all, went dead at least once a year. It passed under half a mile of chestnuts which were always drooping their heavy branches over it, in spite of the work of the Post Office linesmen and their saws.

There was no point in driving up to the village just to find that all the lines, and not only mine, were down; so I set out for Dorchester. I was cautious, but not at all convinced that I had any reason to be. I reckoned that if my telephone had really been cut by some crazy outfit, their only purpose was to gain time to escape. I took only one precaution, and that was to unload Pink's gun in case I had to frighten someone with it.

I also intended to drive pretty fast, but that I could not do. Half a mile from my house I caught up a plain, dusty black van which would not let me pass. Even this was not conclusive. On our twisting roads a slow and nervous driver can hold up the car behind him for bend after bend. Then the van stopped in the middle of the road and spilled out two men from the double doors at the back.

They darted straight at my car. I was out of it on the instant, and held them up with Pink's gun. They gave me no trouble. I was a bit of an expert in house-to-house fighting towards the end of the war, and for a naturally peaceful man I can put on a convincing show of ferocity. These two chaps were well-trained, too. They kept their hands up, and their eyes on my face without flickering off for a moment; and that, since another couple were creeping up behind me, must have been difficult.

The spacing of the attack was perfect. The other two had been hiding behind the hedge just round the corner of an open gate. I had only just time to half-turn my head when my arms were grasped, and a pad of some anaesthetic forced over my face. My arms and legs were securely held, and the more I heaved, the more I inhaled that damned chloroform mixture.

When I recovered consciousness I was on the floor of the van, neatly tied up and fairly comfortably settled on a pile of sacking. I don't think I had been laid out for more than a few minutes, for I felt well enough after all the vivid dreams had cleared away. The stranger from Bournemouth and another man were with me. They had the vasculum. I decided that there was nothing whatever to be gained by anger or protest.

" How the devil do you think you are going to get away with this ? " I asked as reasonably as I could. " You aren't in Russia you know."

" In Russia there is fortunately no need for this violence," the stranger answered.

" But, my dear sir," I told him, " my office, my wife, everybody will be looking for me."

" Naturally ! And so I shall not keep you more than a few hours."

" You'll have the police after you before that."

" It is possible," he replied with a half-smile that held in it a weary fatalism. " But you did not want to appeal to the police last night, and I do not think you can have done so since."

" And what about my car ? "

" That ? That has been driven away. I needed it. I will explain to you later."

IT is curious how one attaches quite a different meaning to the same face according to the circumstances in which one sees it. I had first thought of this man as fussy and eager and considering himself too intelligent for Bournemouth. Then, as we walked together to my car, I put him down as some grubby sort of foreign agent. Now I saw that he was a man of a certain melancholy power, as cool and concentrated as some professional bridge-player calculating how far his poor hand can be used to wreck his opponents. Yet all the time I was looking at the same face, with its sharp nose and thin mouth, and eyes set exceptionally close together so that his gaze seemed focussed for exact clarity on the object before him, to the exclusion of all vaguer shadows at the side.

His real name I do not know. His assistants addressed him, with considerable respect, as Yegor Ivanovitch. From the moment I woke up in the van he never made any attempt to hide the fact that he was a Russian security officer.

I lay on the sacking for about three-quarters of an hour of fairly fast driving. We passed through no big town. I noticed, in the last phase, a short, steep hill with sharp bends ; then a mile or two of straight and a turning. At this point the other chap in the van stuffed my ears with cotton wool and pulled a black bag over my head.

Now we went down a long slope over a roughish road ; and after

it, just before we stopped, came an abrupt leap upwards which I took to be the drive into a house. I was carried out of the van and down some steep steps. I was then set free of bag, ear-plugs, cords and all, and found myself in a basement room or cellar, carpeted and fitted up with table and chairs. It had no windows, and was lit by a modern paraffin lamp.

Yegor Ivanovitch offered me a drink with the unmistakable neutrality of a policeman. His manners, perhaps, simulated cordiality more lightly than those of Scotland Yard. He seemed to consider drinking a ceremony which had its own rules, however unpleasant the business to follow.

" And now," he said, offering me a chair at the table, and taking one himself at the opposite side, " let us have a talk. You have done me a great favour."

I didn't much care for this surprising opening, or for my position on the wrong side of his temporary desk; so I smiled and said nothing.

" These ' moths ' you were collecting . . ." he went on. " But it seems that everything else you told me last night was true ? "

" Within reason," I answered.

" Within reason, of course. It may interest you to know that I have made a careful study of English police methods."

He had a habit, which laid a polite veneer over interrogation, of making a casual, plain statement and ending the sentence as if it were a question.

" I hope you have profited by them."

" Profited ? No. They cannot be adapted to our greater economic freedom. I was going to tell you only that I know your police never break the law."

" Sometimes they must," I answered, hoping that he would take me to have acted in an official capacity.

" Never ! Nor your secret police either, such as they are. No, Mr. Taine, you don't belong to *them*. I think you must be just a friend of Commander . . ." and he gave Pink his real name.

" No," I said. " A little more responsible than that."

Score one for him. I was so anxious to make myself out a person of importance who would be missed at once that I had admitted Pink's identity.

He did not show the least awareness of his success.

" This anarchistic, individual patriotism is hard for me to understand," he said. " There are so many of you English who will act for your country without orders, and never care if you are disowned afterwards. Mr. Taine, I am going to assume that you have no sort of official position ? "

" If it suits you."

" Now why should we fence ? Let us be allies as during the war."

" Better be careful you aren't shot when you get home," I said.

" Shot ? Why ? I should not be shot if I made a mistake. I should be sent to work for my country wherever work was hard and unpleasant. Mr. Taine, I have been watching that criminal Losch for

some weeks. And because we never met, I know that you and the commander have hardly watched at all."

He offered me another drink which I refused, and then adjusted the lamp. It was vile to remember that there was a Dorset summer day outside.

" I am sorry. I am afraid the light has been in your eyes," he said. " Mr. Taine, I give you my word that I and my staff were sent to England to find those ticks and prevent them being used. My enquiries led me to suspect Losch, but I could not be sure—until the commander interrupted us last night. Please do not believe that we Russians have horns and hooves. We are men like you. We do not come out of police romances. We do not spread diseases."

" It would be so awkward if you were caught," I replied.

" Of course," he agreed. " And there is another thing you must understand. The relations between our government and the new People's Democracies are not at all what you think. We cannot compel obedience. We can only advise and apply a tactful pressure. Were you ever in civil affairs in Germany ? "

" No, thank God ! "

" It is a pity. You would have realised our difficulties. We cannot make communists of the Germans, Mr. Taine. We can only make soldiers. And you will never make of them your so-called democrats. You will only make soldiers. They have no sense of politics, no sense of anything but to impose their hysterical will. This—" he touched Pink's vasculum which was strapped to his waist "—is their doing, not ours."

" What about the Colorado beetle story ? " I retorted. " Don't tell me your propaganda people didn't think that one up ! "

" I think it probable. What else could they do ? Suppose I had not got on to the track of Losch in time, whom would you have blamed when you found out the cause of your dying cattle ? For the sake of all who trust us to give them a world of freedom, we had to have a story ready. Colorado beetles !—" he laughed with a note of pity. "—an invention good enough for the masses as they are—but not, Mr. Taine, for the masses as they will be."

" What are you going to do with Losch ? " I asked.

" I had a short interview with him last night after I left you. He is a party member and will obey. He will go to Russia in my care."

That seemed to me a grim and entirely fitting journey for Losch. Lord help me, I was inclined to think quite kindly of Ivanovitch !

" You propose that I should go too ? " I asked.

" Whenever you wish, Mr. Taine, I shall be delighted to see that you are given a visa. But all I want now is your help. And I am sure I will get it. This matter, you see, is now cleared up. When I left Losch, the thorns were burning in his fireplace. This case of yours I have. And in a week or two there will be nothing in Tangier to worry either of us. This absurd, unauthorised weapon in what you call the cold war will be as if it had never existed."

" The commander ? "

" An ex-fascist, a paid jackal, a murderer and now a bandit," he

answered with a contemptuous hatred that boded ill for Pink. " Would anyone in their senses believe him ? "

" But he has been believed," I said.

" No, Mr. Taine, he has not ; if he had, Losch would be in the hands of the police, or every contact of his watched day and night. No, no, I can avoid all unpleasantness if you are silent."

I replied cautiously that no-one wished to make unnecessary trouble, and that if his Embassy were to explain the true position as he had explained it to me, any action taken would certainly be discreet and unofficial. We all knew the capacity of Germans for running wild.

" That is most friendly," he said. " I knew that I could count on you. But there are difficulties. My little party, with Losch, must leave the country. And then we must have time to handle Holberg ourselves. That means, I fear, that I must *ensure* your silence. Yes, I am bound to insist that you keep silent for, say, a couple of weeks."

" That's an impossible request. I won't."

" I think you will. Excuse me a moment."

He went out, holding the door open long enough for me to see that there were a couple of solid-looking toughs outside it, one of whom had been with him in the van. Ivanovitch must have been given his pick from the whole of his service, for every one of his men could pass as British in appearance and language.

That room was like a tomb. I could hear nothing whatever. The four white-washed walls were round me, blank and unbroken by any object but a loud-speaker high up in a corner. I lit a pipe and sat down, and tried to imagine some way by which my silence could be ensured *without killing or keeping me.*

Ivanovitch returned after about a quarter of an hour. The two men outside entered the room with him.

" You must now prepare yourself for a shock," he said. " But please remember that you have nothing to be alarmed about. I want you to listen to that loud-speaker."

He touched a switch beneath it. I couldn't for a moment make out the sound I heard ; then it was clearly a child sobbing. I looked at the three men, puzzled. The child was sobbing in a rhythm very like George's ; but still I could not understand.

Then Jerry's voice came through, as firmly as if he were in the room. He was playing the bold man for all his seven years were worth, and imitating the very tone in which I would comfort either of them when they were upset for no good reason.

" Don't *cry* ! " he said. " If Daddy sent the car for us, Daddy must be here."

I gathered my feet under me and smashed the nearest Russian. It did me a bit of good to see him spitting blood, but the savagery was utterly futile. Yegor Ivanovitch had his pistol trained on me.

" If you make me kill you, they can never go back to their mother," he reminded me. " Sit down ! "

I sat down.

" They locked the door," George wept.

" I don't suppose they did *really*," Jerry answered. " Use your handkerchief ! "

I was so proud of him. I would have sold my soul to the devil.

" Enough ? " asked Ivanovitch.

" Enough."

" I had better tell you what happened," he said, " so that you will know the explanations you must give. My assistants took your car and called for the children at the school, saying that you wanted them home for lunch. The mistress knew your car, of course. Why should she question it ? A mad risk to take, yes—but I have had so little time for planning. Mr. Taine, we are both very lucky. If you had not taken the road to Dorchester this morning, you would have been shot from the roadside between your house and the village. If I had not got your children, you would be shot now. But at last we can breathe. We have time. Time," he repeated thankfully.

" How much time do you need ? " I asked.

" I told you. A week or two."

" And if I do not say a word . . .? "

" If you and your wife do not say a word, if you can pretend that they have gone—oh, to their grandmother, for example—then they will be returned to you at the first possible opportunity. But do not be impatient. It may be difficult."

" Why difficult ? " I stormed.

" Because, Mr. Taine, your children and Losch and ourselves will all, I hope, be out of the country tonight. We shall leave by private means, and I shall restore your children by private means. If you inform the police, you might make it quite impossible for me to return them at all. I cannot, you see, simply put them on a channel boat under the eyes of the world. I must be sure that no-one but you is looking out for them or expecting them."

I begged him to let me speak to the children, but he would not. He apologised for this cruelty—he frankly described it as cruelty—explaining that the children had seen in what direction and where they had been driven.

" In fairness to them," he said, " I cannot allow you to have the least idea where you are. If you knew, the temptation to appeal to the police would be irresistible. And now we must hurry, if you are to get back in time to warn your wife. You will persuade her not to be foolish as best you can."

My mind was in a blank prison of helplessness. How I could get my boys back, how I could face Cecily—those two questions were swirling through my head like a fever dream. I wasn't thinking at all. I was simply exclaiming to myself.

Yet then, in that room, it wouldn't have helped me if I could have thought with the clarity of a chess-player. There was nothing I could force Yegor Ivanovitch to do except to kill me. That, it is true, would have badly upset his plans. Cecily, finding herself in the evening without children or husband, would have instantly got in touch with Roland, and the next day the police would be in action all over the country. But would the police succeed in finding this

hide-out? And, if they did, would they find it in time? Ivanovitch talked of leaving that very night.

"I shall take you back in the van as you came," he said. "I need hardly tell you that the registration number which you have seen is false. I shall then leave you with your car, not far from your own home. One of your tyres will be flat, and you will have to change the wheel. That will prevent you following us. And please do not have any fear for your brave boys. We are all fathers. And it is the first duty of a Russian citizen to care for the next generation."

I submitted to the indignity of being trussed up again. Good lord, they could have insulted me as they pleased—painted my nose blue or made me sign any confession they wished! I was in such a state that I should have welcomed it. To be humiliated was a sort of expiation for my folly.

All went as Ivanovitch had said it would. The drive was longer, and over a rougher road than that by which we had come. At last the van stopped. I was untied and pushed out. Simultaneously the man who had been driving my car to the rendezvous jumped in. The van roared away. My car was standing on the green verge of a country lane, pointing in the opposite direction to that in which the van had disappeared. It had a flat tyre, and the jack was already in position.

It was three p.m. I had less than half an hour to get home before Cecily set out to fetch the children from school. My captors had run it fine. If Cecily showed anxiety when she found the children gone, there was little we could do thereafter to hush up their disappearance. I changed that wheel in record time, and drove straight up the lane to higher ground. In two minutes I was on the top of the downs, and saw below me a long village street which I recognized as Piddletrenthide. In ten more minutes I was at my door.

WHAT happened between Cecily and myself is nobody's business but ours, and neither of us want to recall it. Had she been, from the start, eager and willing that I should work for Roland, we might perhaps have broken down in tears together over our joint folly. As it was, I was overwhelmed by guilt. There was I, well, alive, unhurt, without the children.

The telephone had been mended. I tore it out of her hands when she insisted on calling the police. I drove it home to her that Yegor Ivanovitch could never take the risk of returning our boys if the police were on the look out for them; any man seen with them, here or abroad, would be instantly arrested and his contacts and antecedents traced.

I tried to explain to her that, after all, Ivanovitch wouldn't want to be bothered with them more than necessary; that when he had destroyed all the evidence of those cursed ticks in Tangier, he wouldn't mind what story I told, and would have no need to hold any hostage for my good behaviour.

"Why should he ever return them?" she cried at me. "What about the Greek children?"

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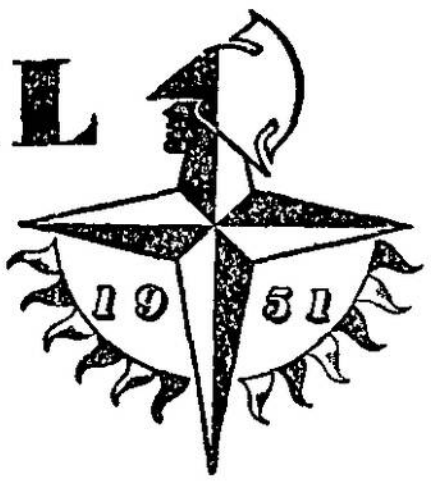

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"But what could I do?" I implored her.

"You came home without them."

I moved away to pour myself a drink, to pick up the paper, to do I know not what in order to separate myself from my beloved. Meanwhile she prowled back and forth across the room, dead white, her eyes cold with torture and anger. When I tried to say something, she shouted at me to leave her alone to think.

"Losch—was he at this house?" she asked.

"I don't know. I don't believe he was."

"Why wasn't he? Oh, pull yourself together and *think!*"

"Because he couldn't just vanish," I answered. "Because he's a respected citizen of Bournemouth. Ivanovitch must have left him free to clean up his affairs, whether he liked it or not."

"Why doesn't Losch go to the police? Does he expect any mercy when he gets to Russia?"

"He might," I answered. "More than here, at any rate. They may have offered him a laboratory beyond the Urals where he can't get into trouble. Something of that sort would be their game."

"Would he be watched?"

"How can I know?" I repeated hopelessly. "Perhaps. But they may just fetch him when they are ready."

"Get him first," she said. "You and Pink."

I couldn't even judge her proposal on its merits. We were so limitlessly apart that nothing either of us said had meaning. I was determined not to compromise the children. I insisted that it was too great a risk.

"There isn't any risk that is too great," she answered frantically.

I didn't agree, but her tone stung me at last into constructive thinking. It might well be that Yegor Ivanovitch had left one untidy end in all his quickly improvised planning; after all, it was only a little over twelve hours since Pink had made his disastrous appearance at my car.

Cecily perceived my change of mood—though I do not remember saying a word—and her eyes were fixed on me more kindly.

"Don't stay with me," she said, "and don't listen to me! But just remember Losch! When you are with Pink, you'll—oh, you'll see more clearly. I can't advise you."

I wanted her to go away for the week-end—partly so that she wouldn't be alone in the house, and partly so that I could communicate with her safely. She wouldn't hear of it. She couldn't bear the thought of the children coming home—unlikely though it was—and finding the door locked. She understood that she might be condemning herself to remain without news of any of us beyond, perhaps, a very guarded telephone call. Such patient courage is beyond me.

I changed out of my London suit, and took with me kit for a couple of nights. I looked longingly at my old army revolver, but I had no ammo. for it, and I'd had enough of empty pistols. Then I drove down to the office and told my clerk that I was taking the children away for the week-end and might not be back till Tuesday.

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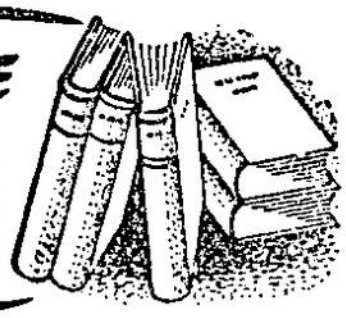

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I found a message on my desk that the Dorchester police had telephoned. I called them back, in an intolerable mood of wild hope that they were going to report some suspicious circumstance which might lead straight to my boys.

The reason for the call was plain routine. The inspector wanted to know if the person who had talked to a constable in Bournemouth at 2 a.m. had really been me.

"I didn't know you collected moths," he remarked invitingly.

He was the same inspector who had been just too late to run me in the previous autumn. Ever since he had regarded me as a first-class subject for nods and winks and knowing conversation.

"What was it all about?" I asked him.

"Someone broke into a Dr. Losch's house. Nothing missing, though he did a power of damage in getting out. You ought to know of Losch if you collect moths."

I nearly said I didn't, and then had a flash of inspiration.

"I did just meet him once," I replied. "He struck me as a nervous sort of chap."

"What made you think so?" he asked at once.

"Oh, just an impression."

"Well, you summed him up all right. He was burning something in his chimney early this morning, and now he has told Bournemouth police that he is so upset he has to go away for a week or two."

"By the way," I said, "who was that officious ass who wanted to have me run in?"

"Just a journalist of some sort who has had rooms across the road from Losch for the last fortnight."

I wanted to suggest to the inspector that Bournemouth police should check the antecedents of the journalist; but such a lead could only mean that I knew something and that I had not been on the scene by the merest accident. I had to tell the police all or nothing. And if I told them all—*you might make it impossible for me to return them* Ivanovitch had said.

I GOT to West Bay about six, and ran my car into a hotel garage where it wouldn't be seen by every casual passer-by.

The wind had been freshening all day. The headlands of Devon were a long black line in the west with black clouds above them; but the sun was out, and the even, white-capped seas racing across Lyme Bay looked more exhilarating than dangerous. I waited for half an hour, and then I saw a speck of white, part solid and part a moving fountain of spray, coming up from the west.

I watched Pink round the breakwater with beautiful ease, and heard him exchange hails with some official on the quayside. He claimed to be making a passage from the Exe to Portland and coming in for shelter. You couldn't have disbelieved him. He was clean-shaven and fresh and merry with the sea. His white sweater and shorts, when he peeled off his oilskins, were properly expensive and weather-beaten, and he was the very picture of a simple, healthy naval officer on a holiday.

It was the top of the tide, and he took *Olwen* up through the lock gates into the lagoon at the mouth of the Brit. I hailed him with a surprised Good-lord-who'd-have-thought-to-see-you. He played up splendidly and shouted something about not having met since Alexandria. Then he paddled the pram over and fetched me, and I went down into that desolatingly neat cabin.

"You're back soon," he said.

I couldn't bring myself to give him more than an unrevealing, brutal outline of the facts. It wasn't that I had any resentment against Pink. He was in trouble enough himself. My story, when I came to tell it, seemed such a shameful admission of inefficiency and defeat.

Pink was gentle as a mother. I didn't expect him to have that characteristic. He wouldn't let me blame myself at all. That, I suppose, was what Cecily hoped or foresaw, knowing that she herself could only throw me into worse distress.

"Any idea at all where they took you?" he asked.

"No. We went up and down a considerable hill, and we never seemed to pass through a town. That looks like the north of the county."

"You can make your mind easy on one score," he said. "They won't leave tonight. We're in for a real blow, and I tell you we've got at least twenty-four hours to play with. Look here, we'll get back into the harbour while the tide serves. We might want to go to sea in a hurry."

He took *Olwen* again through the lock gates, and anchored in the outer pool. Except for a little coaster tied up to the quay, we had the port to ourselves.

"Had anything to eat since breakfast?" he asked. "No, I thought not. Well, we'll put that right first."

He produced a cold pie and salad and a bottle of wine.

As soon as I felt a usefuller member of society, he asked: "What does your missus expect us to do with Losch?"

"God knows. Exchange him, perhaps."

"Bad bargain from their point of view," Pink said. "The moment you had your boys back, you'd go straight to the police."

"I don't think she had any definite plan," I said. "She just spotted a hole in their arrangements."

"We might as well see if he can be got," Pink suggested cheerfully, "and open up the game a bit."

I didn't much care for opening up the game without having the faintest notion how to win it, but I was too grateful to think hardly of Pink. He hadn't said a word of his own troubles and of the fate that awaited him when Yegor Ivanovitch supplied the Portuguese police with a name for their set of finger-prints.

"If we could get Losch down in this cabin, we could probably make him talk," Pink went on. "I don't know, old man, where you'd draw a line."

"Nowhere—so long as you've got a heavy weight to sink what's left of him."

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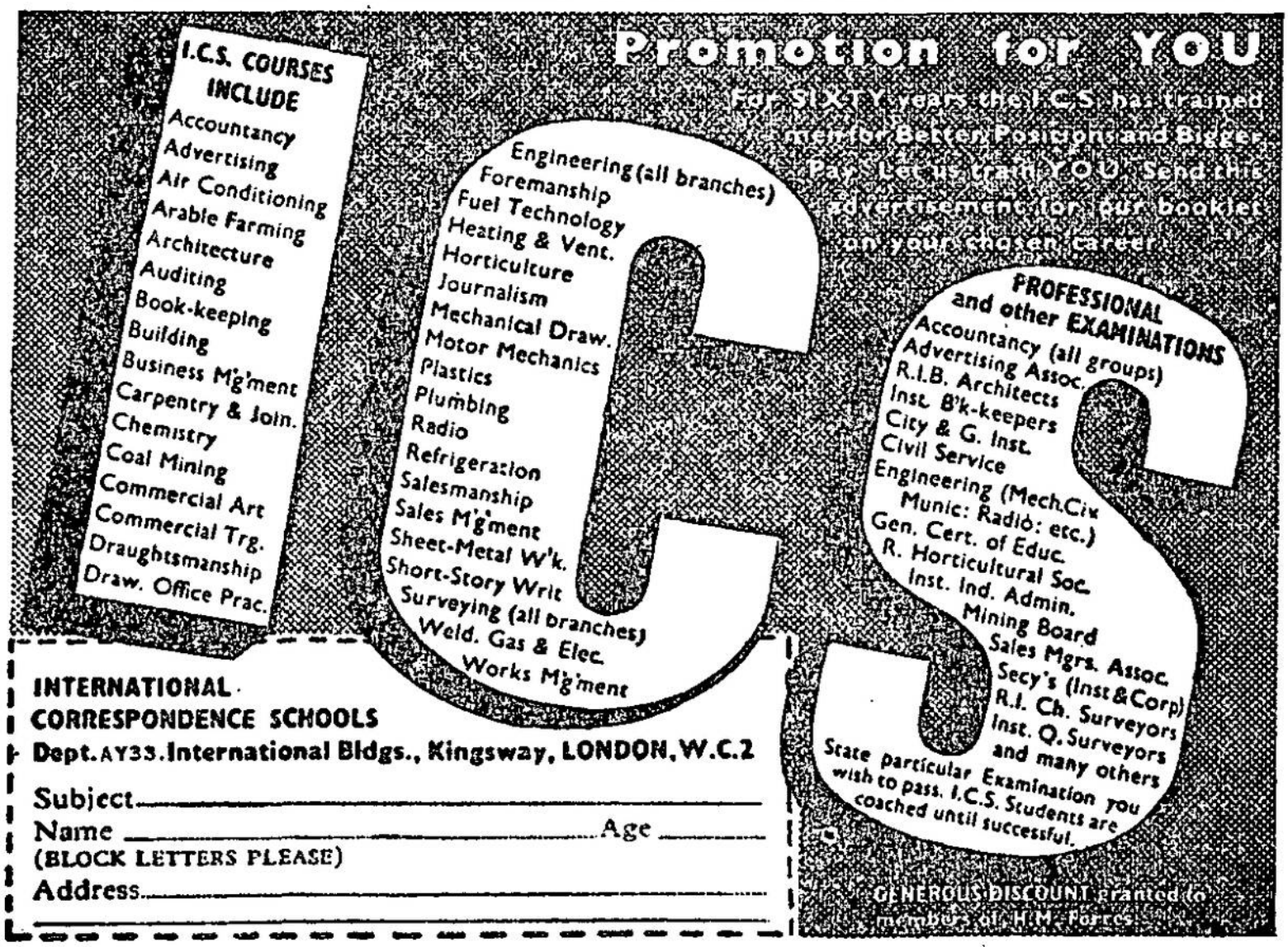

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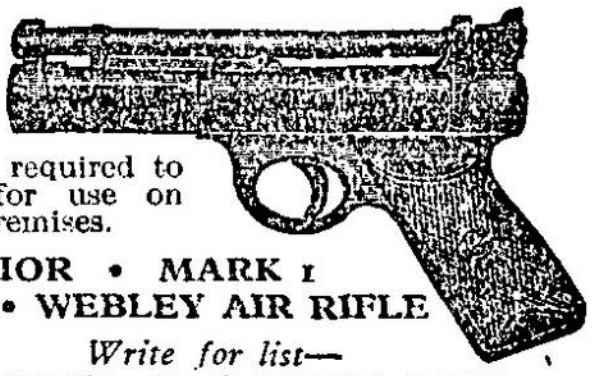

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"That's the spirit!" he said. "Now here's another line of country. If I were copped, the police would want Losch to identify me. Now, if I gave myself up, would that delay the whole party?"

I couldn't see that it would. The identification parade could not take more than an hour or two. I was thinking so deeply and selfishly that for a moment the magnanimity of Pink's offer went clean over my head.

"Good lord, Pink," I exclaimed, "if I thought it would do any good, I'd probably have handed you over already!"

"That's the spirit!" he said again. He made himself comfortable on the settee, and poured out some brandy. It was the first drink I had tasted without the feeling that I had no right to enjoy it.

"How many men has this Ivanovitch got?" he asked.

"Well, everything he has done could be done with four and himself."

"Four's a lot. He could spare a man to keep an eye on Losch."

"I wonder if we would be caught if we telephoned Losch to come down to the police station and identify his burglar."

"Why the devil should we be?" Pink exclaimed heartily. "And we must take a chance somewhere."

His enthusiasm put me off. Suppose Losch telephoned the police station to have the request confirmed? Suppose Ivanovitch or one of his men accompanied him? Suppose we were arrested while trying to kidnap him?

"Yes," said Pink, "and suppose Ivanovitch doesn't see why he should return Jerry and George anyway, and brings 'em up to be bloody commissars!"

That clinched it. "I hope he doesn't know much about English police methods," I said.

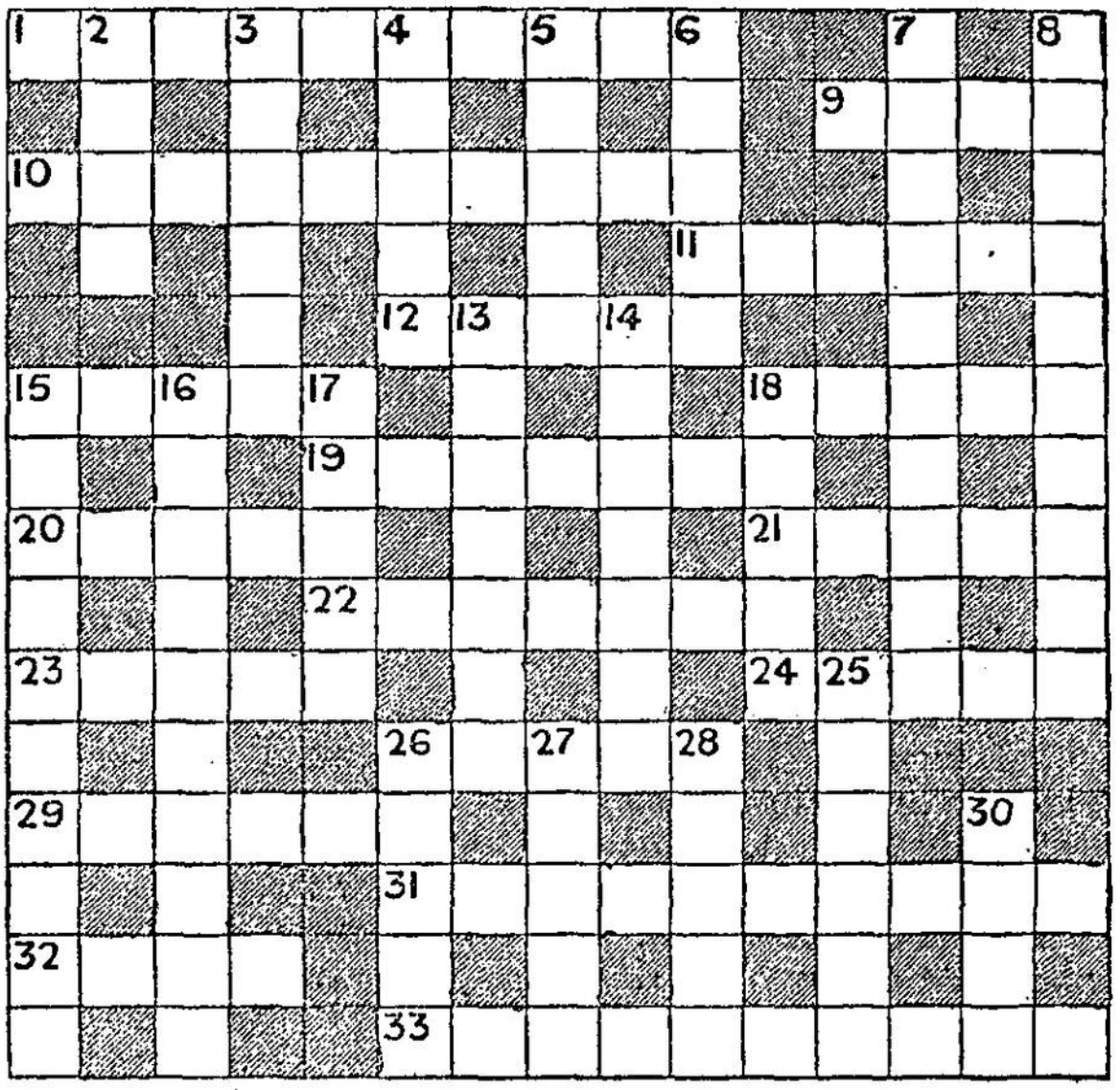
"Don't care if he does," Pink answered. "But I tell you—because I've listened to 'em and I know—that a German in his position is going to have nightmares about the British Secret Service. Losch will think there's no limit to what they might do. God, he ought to see Roland calling a conference to decide whether it's safe to pass a traffic light!"

I went ashore, and called Cecily, just to say that all was well, and the night too dirty for anything but regular cross-Channel services to run. I tried to keep my imagination away from the three beings who were most precious to me, but I doubt if I slept at all.

★*The second and last part of this story will appear in the next issue of ARGOSY, on sale July 10th. Why not make sure of a copy by placing an order with your newsagent?*

ARGOSY CROSS WORD

Solution on page 78



CLUES

Across

1 All the ingredients for a voyage produce the skill to undertake it (10).

9 Sally to be eaten (4).

10 I stir Drava; and make music (10).

11 Two bees in the Nile? They'll have to chew their way out! (6).

12 Build in Crete (5).

15 Prophet who has a watery end (5).

18 A nominal diet for Jack? (5).

19 Spoil for a walk via Tite Street? (7).

20 A partly morose beast (5).

21 I should hardly expect to be this so near to the Riviera resort (2, 3).

22 Abstain from the chorus! (7).

23 But the detective came too late to attend this Council! (5).

24 Lisle from an island (5).

26 Decapitated; but the head walked backwards (5).

29 Some pupil may throw light on this (6).

31 Natural rig for Euclid (10).

32 "If —— and sugar be a fault, God help the wicked!"—*Shakespeare* King Henry IV, Part I (4).

33 Name one might expect to see up on the viaduct (4, 6).

Down

2 Common food that might be got for teas (4).

3 Grain more than could be eaten at one sitting (6).

4 I've an idea; it's simple (5).

5 Move the Aventine Hill (5).

6 Publish the fabric (5).

7 Where, of course, one expects to get a square deal (6, 4).

8 Serious application to camping by the Ness (10).

13 A confused decree gives flavour when initiated by an artist (7).

14 Play on a word (7).

15 This may have laid Sohrab low; but it ends on Rustum's head (4, 6).

16 Injunction to fire the rick—or put it in your pipe (5-5).

17 Assert it to a T (5).

18 "The red-fool fury of the——"—*Tennyson* (5).

25 Take it with ice for a cough (6).

26 Snip at chintz; and make a mend (5).

27 A lot of fish; so hold tight! (5).

28 So Ned is patron saint of France! (5).

30 A hundred to copy on the coast (4).

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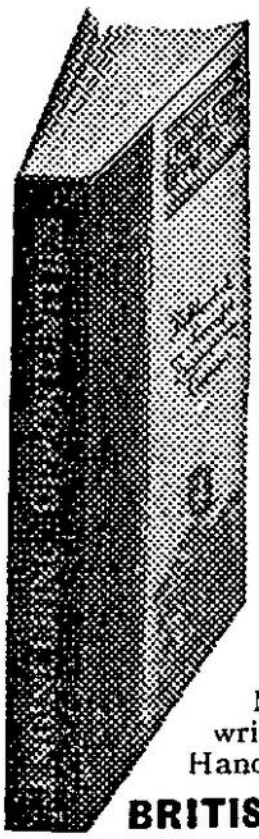

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